

STORY LIGHT TUCHIHI
ILLUS. Saori Toyota

4

THE HERO IS
OVERPOWERED
BUT
OVERLY CAUTIOUS

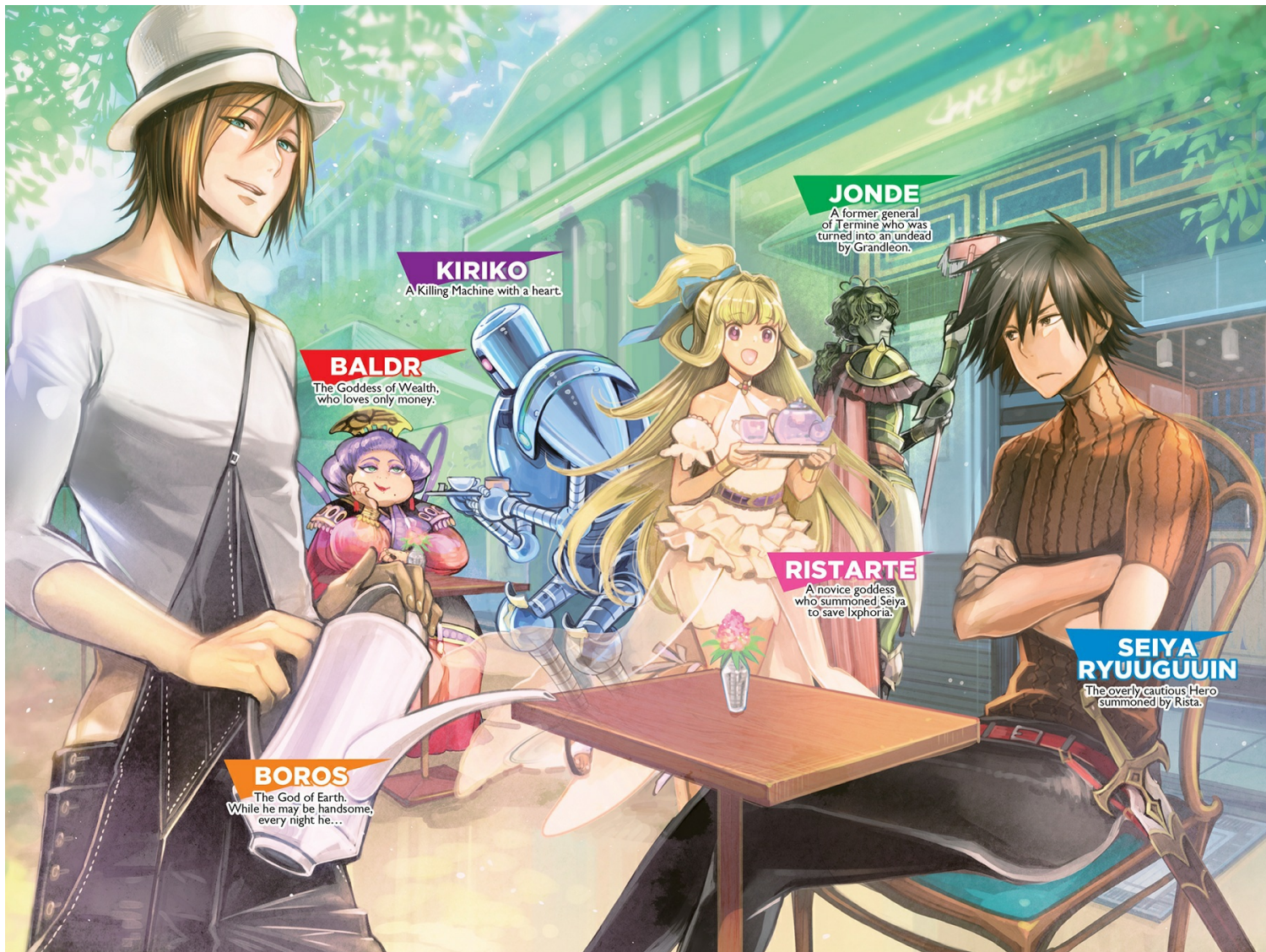
VISIT...

LANZAROTE
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“That’s
my secret
weapon—
Mega Rista.”

“That’s not
what I’m
wondering!
I want to
know why it
looks like
me!! You
could have
just made it
look like a
golem!”



KIRIKO
A Killing Machine with a heart.

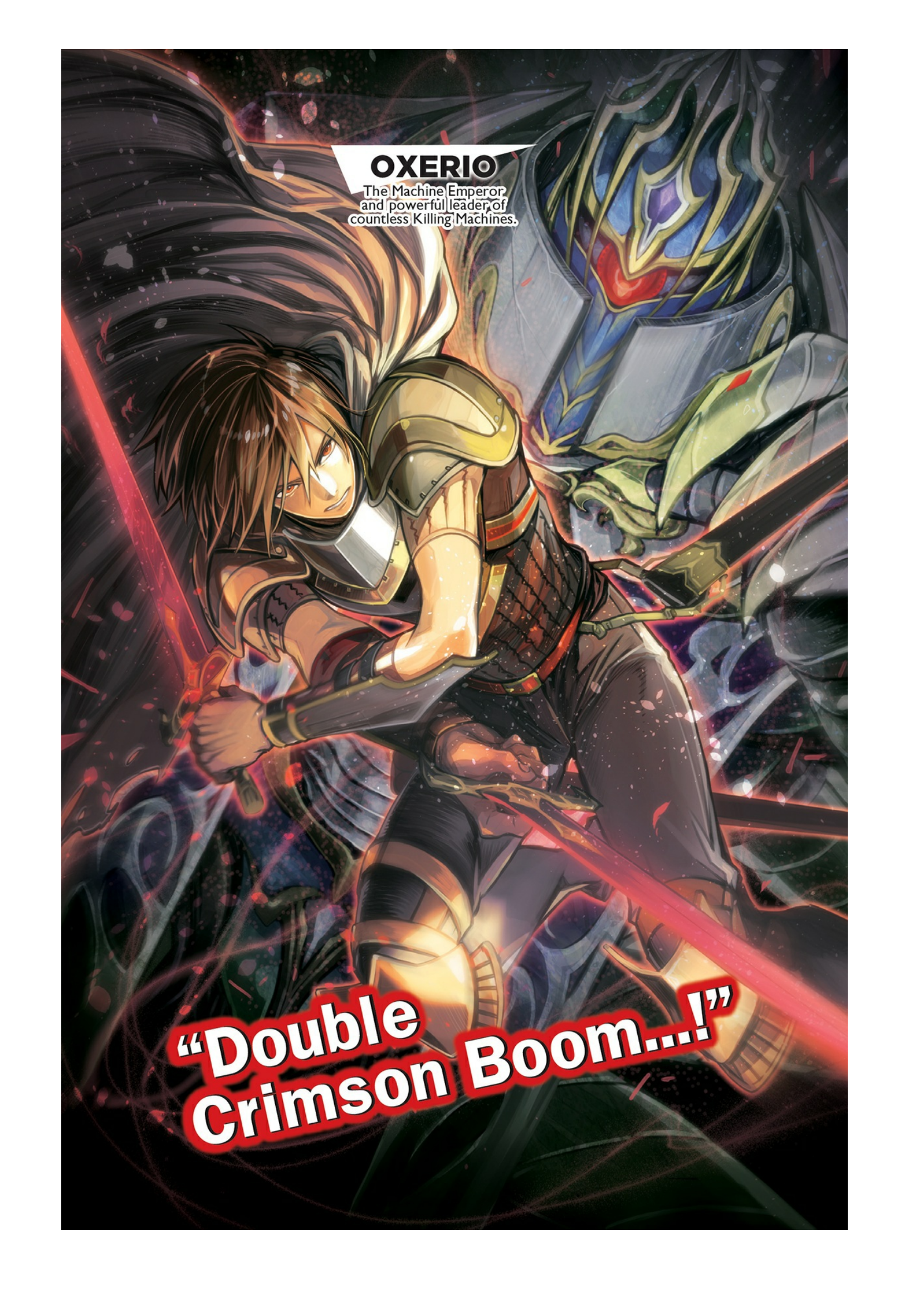
BALDR
The Goddess of Wealth,
who loves only money.

JONDE
A former general
of Termine who was
turned into an undead
by Grandleon.

RISTARTE
A novice goddess
who summoned Seiya
to save Ixphoria.

**SEIYA
RYUUGUIN**
The overly cautious Hero
summoned by Rista.

BOROS
The God of Earth.
While he may be handsome,
every night he...



OXERIO

The Machine Emperor
and powerful leader of
countless Killing Machines.

**“Double
Crimson Boom...!”**

THE HERO IS
OVERPOWERED
BUT
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STORY

LIGHT TUCHIHI

ILLUS.

SAORI TOYOTA

4

YEN
ON
NEW YORK

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TRANSLATION BY MATT RUTSOHN

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KONO YUSHA GA ORE TUEEE KUSENI SHINCHO SUGIRU Vol. 4

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The God of Earth

It's been one problem after another ever since Seiya and I got sent to Ixphoria—a world we were unable to save in the past. Right when the werewolf's amnesia effect wore off and Seiya returned to normal, the Beast Emperor Grandleon showed up. Seiya was able to defeat him with the forbidden Berserk technique that he'd learned, but our relief was short-lived. We soon learned that the Machine Emperor Ozerio was heading our way along with tens of thousands of Killing Machines known as the machine corps.

I shuddered at the thought of facing yet another powerful enemy and was so shaken up that I even almost forgot I was a goddess, but the overly cautious Hero I'd summoned, Seiya Ryuuguuin, maintained his composure. He then said that he wanted to go back to the spirit world and prepare, as he always does.

“‘Prepare’?! Don't tell me you plan on leaving Termine like this?!”

Jonde, the former general of Termine, yells at Seiya when he hears he's returning to the spirit world. Jonde may be tall, with a masculine physique, but his skin is as pale as clay. His untamed, wavy hair runs down his back and past his sunken eyes. He was used as a mere plaything, destined to live forever as an undead while Grandleon reigned over Termine.

I explain to General Jonde that time in the spirit world moves slowly and that we will be back in about one Ixphorian hour. He seems to take the news well. Jonde then puts on a serious expression, looks at me, and says: “Goddess, there is something I would like you to do before you return to the spirit world.”

“Hmm? What's that?”

“I want you to...let me die.”

“Jonde! What in the world are you saying?”

Queen Carmilla, my mother in a past life, yells at him, but he simply smiles

back at her.

“My queen, no tools or spells can restore an undead’s humanity. It is probably only a matter of time before I lose sanity and begin attacking those around me.”

The queen and I are speechless.

But even so...I can’t just kill such a brilliant general!

“Ascending to the heavens by the goddess’s hand would be the greatest honor.”

Jonde smiles. At a loss, I turn to Seiya, who gives me a nod, then in the most natural way says: “True, he could lose sanity at any moment. We should put him out of his misery as soon as possible.”

What the...?! You’re terrible!

Even Jonde knits his brow.

“It is extremely aggravating to hear you say that, but...well, you have a point. Goddess, I beg of you. Release me from this curse.”

“Are you sure?”

Jonde nods. The queen appears to have accepted his decision as well. With a grave expression, Jonde lowers his head to me and lets me know he’s sure. The queen thereupon faces him.

“Jonde...thank you for serving Termine all these years.”

“Queen Carmilla, I will be watching over the restoration of Termine from the heavens.”

The sorrowful farewell burns the corners of my eyes, but this is no time to be crying! I am a goddess! I must help him smoothly and painlessly pass on out of respect for his decision!

I place a hand on Jonde’s forehead.

“I shall return General Jonde’s soul to the heavens!”

I unleash a holy healing spell that causes damage to undead. White smoke rises from under my hand against his forehead.

...Crackle. Crackle. Crackle.

His face twists in agony.

...Three minutes pass before Jonde cries out like he can't take it anymore.

"G-Goddess...! I would really appreciate it if you could get it over with quickly!"

"Yes, I know!"

Wh-what am I doing?! I have to unleash all my power if I want this to work! The longer this goes on, the more he'll suffer!

After taking in a deep breath, I open my eyes wide with determination.

Ahhhhhh! Burst into flames, my small galaxy! Arise, my ultra-goddess powers!

...Crackle. Crackle. Crackle. Crackle. Crackle.

However, the holy light simply continues to burn Jonde's forehead no more than around three centimeters across. That's when, out of nowhere, he suddenly rips out his hair.

"I can't take it anymore! The paaain! I feel like my forehead's being burned with a magnifying glass under the sun!"

"I-I'm sorry!"

It looks like it'll take a few hours with my limited goddess powers before I can send Jonde to the afterlife. Seiya then approaches Jonde with a fed-up sigh.

"Fine. I'll toss him into the magma of the planet's core with Endless Fall."

"...?! I was hoping to ascend to the heavens, not drop into the pits of hell! Being killed by you is the last thing I want!"

Seiya lets out another sigh.

"We're losing valuable time. He's fine like this for now. I'll leave some powerful earth serpents with him just in case he does go berserk."

Earth serpents wrap around Jonde's wrists, ankles, and neck like jewelry. As Jonde's face clouds with utter disgust, the queen places a hand on his shoulder.



“Heh-heh. It appears we will be spending a little more time together. I’m counting on you, Jonde.”

“Y-yes, my queen!”

I made things a little awkward at first, but after seeing the looks of joy on the queen’s and Jonde’s faces...I feel kind of good about it. And just like that, Seiya and I walk through the gate and return to the spirit world.

After arriving at the spirit world plaza, I ask Seiya: “So how do you plan on preparing for the machine corps?”

“I want to focus on perfecting my current abilities rather than learning a new one. In short, I plan on mastering earth magic.”

“So...do you want to meet the God of Earth?”

“Exactly. I want to begin training immediately, so if you know him...”

The deities of the five natural elements, such as fire, water, and earth, are highly regarded in the spirit world, and I’ve met the God of Earth, Boros, a few times. While many gods in the spirit world are massive and muscular, Boros is a slender deity with beautiful features. He’s so dainty that I could breathe on him and he’d get carried off by the wind.

We walk away from the plaza for a short while until I can see a beautiful field of flowers up ahead. Boros’s dark-brown hair peeks out from under his straw hat as, watering can in hand, he waters the myriad colorful flowers under the vast blue sky.

“Hey, Boros.”

“Hey, Ristarte. Lovely weather we’re having today, isn’t it?”

After greeting me with a pleasant smile, Boros returns his attention to the flowers.

“I love flowers. Simply looking at them brings me joy.”

Watching him regard the flowers with such tenderness, I feel my heart skip a beat.

How can someone be so hot?!

But when I tell Boros I want him to teach Seiya earth magic, he curiously tilts his head to the side.

“From what I can tell, he seems to already be quite experienced with earth magic.”

He has a point. Seiya’s earth magic is already at a very high level. What else does he need to learn to “master earth magic”?

Seiya approaches Boros, then says:

“Put briefly, I want to be able to create an even more powerful monster than earth serpents. I tried various things, but there is only so much I can do alone. Surely the God of Earth can create something more powerful, though, right?”

“But of course. Through perfecting soil magic, you can use rock magic, and if you learn how to create rock-type monsters, you can create golems and the like, which are far stronger than earth serpents.”

“Golems...! Now I get it! Seiya, you’re going to create an army of monsters to fight the machine corps, aren’t you?!”

“Exactly.”

We stare at Boros until a cheerful smile appears on his lips.

“The Hero is more than qualified to learn how to do this at his current level. Nevertheless, creating rock-type monsters is the most difficult skill when it comes to earth magic. It isn’t something you can do in a day.”

“That won’t work. I need you to hurry.”

This always happens, so I decide to fill Boros in ahead of time.

“Boros, this Hero is amazing! He can master divine skills, which usually take days to learn, in no time at all! That’s why—”

Boros suddenly cuts me off.

“I’ve heard. He is a rare person of talent who was given the task to save an SS-ranked world. They say he learns things in days that should take months.”

“Th-then—!”

“The problem lies with me.”

“Huh?”

A slightly troubled look clouds Boros’s expression.

“My time is limited. In truth, I can only be active from noon to night.”

Boros looks up at the sun.

“Night will soon fall. I only have two free hours left today.”

“What do you mean? Why is your time limited?”

“I’m sorry, but I cannot disclose that information.”

“We have to save a parallel world. I thought the deities of the unified spirit world were supposed to cooperate.”

“I am truly sorry...”

Boros lowers his head, his face stricken with anguish. I cannot help but defend him.

“S-Seiya! We can’t force him! I’m sure he has his reasons!”

A few moments go by before Seiya finally speaks up.

“...Fine. Then teach me as much as you can for the next two hours.”

“Very well. Then let’s get started.”

Thus their time-limited training begins.

Seeing the calm, handsome Hero training under the kind, attractive deity is a feast for my eyes. Holding back the urge to continue staring, I decide to leave the field of flowers behind so I won’t get in the way of their training.

It’s strange, though. Why is his time limited? He has very fair skin, and he’s basically a walking stick figure, so maybe he has some sort of chronic illness? But do gods even get sick?

After returning to the plaza, I head over to greet a few familiar faces. Sitting outdoors at Café du Cerceus are Ariadoa and Adenela. Cerceus is bringing them their coffee. Only when I see them do I truly feel like I’m back in the spirit world, and I can’t help but crack a smile.

“Aria! I’m back!”

“Rista!”

Aria rushes over and throws her arms around me.

“I’m so glad you’re okay! That must mean the ritual was a success and you freed Termine!”

“Y-yeah, um... It was...something...”

The ritual actually failed thanks to me, though. Adenela offers me some coffee. I guess she couldn’t stand watching me trip over my words any longer.

“A-anyway, have s-some coffee. I-it’s not good, but i-it’s not bad, either. The flavor’s pretty whatever.”

“Hey! How can you say that?! I put my heart into making this coffee!”

I put my lips on the mug and take a sip. It’s not bad.

“Cerceus! This coffee isn’t bad at all! It’s like the good kind of instant coffee!”

“O-oh, great... Wait! What do you mean it tastes like instant coffee?! I’m using high-quality beans!”

While Cerceus fumes by our side, Ariadoa asks me: “Rista, how’s Seiya?”

“Oh, he’s training under Boros right now.”

“...Boros?”

Seeing Aria fall silent sends a wave of anxiety rushing through me.

“Aria?! H-he’s going to be okay, isn’t he?! He isn’t weird like the other ones, right?!”

“I—I believe so. I’ve never heard any strange rumors about him, at the very least. There is something slightly odd about him, though. He never shows himself at night.”

“Oh, I guess he was telling the truth.”

“He probably has some sort of personal rule, so make sure you keep that in mind if Seiya is going to train under him.”

“Yeah, of course!”

I rise from my chair, then head to the cafeteria to make Seiya’s dinner.

He may be able to help Seiya only for a limited time, but Aria's probably right. Boros isn't some weirdo! In fact, he seems completely normal compared to that perv Mitis or Zet!

...Or, at least, that's what I believe.

The Breakdown

I lose track of time while preparing some sandwiches for Seiya, and by the time I realize it, it's already getting dark. I rush over to the flower field in the spirit world, where I find Seiya and Boros standing slightly in the distance. I overhear them talking.

"Let's call it a day, Seiya."

"I want to keep going."

"I told you I can only help you train until night."

"You look fine to me. Let's continue."

"I—I can't."

"Come on."

"No."

"Just one more hour."

"I told you, I can't."

"Thirty more minutes."

"Please let me go..."

L-leave the guy alone! Seiya's acting like a desperate boy in love who can't take a hint! Seiya refuses to back down until all of a sudden...

"Mn... Mmmm...!"

Boros covers his mouth and groans. I can't just sit back and watch any longer, so I rush over to Boros and spread my arms out in front of him to protect him.

"Seiya, stop! He's clearly in pain!"

I look back at the God of Earth.

“Are you okay, Boros?”

That’s when...

“Stay baaaaaack!”

“Eek?!”

Boros yells at me in a frightening manner, contrary to his kind appearance. However, he promptly lowers his head to me as if he senses that I’m upset.

“M-my apologies. I don’t feel so good today. Let us continue tomorrow...”

He then quickly walks away with a hand still covering his mouth.

I give Seiya a good tongue-lashing after Boros is gone.

“Seiya! You can’t do that! You made a promise to stop before it got dark, didn’t you?”

But Seiya doesn’t even show a hint of remorse. If anything, he seems irritated.

“Hmph. It doesn’t make sense. I wanted to continue training all day.”

He then sends me a distant gaze.

“I guess I don’t have any other choice. Rista, you head back without me. I’m going to continue perfecting my earth magic with what I learned today.”

“O-okay. Fine...”

While he frustratingly only plays by his rules, perfecting his earth magic is essential for saving Ixphoria, so I give up trying to fight him and leave the field of flowers.

The next afternoon, I make some rice balls and bring them to the Summoning Chamber Seiya always sleeps in. But before I leave, I make sure to remind him one more time: “Hey, don’t make Boros do anything he doesn’t want to do, okay?”

“No, I need to make up for lost time. He’s going to help me train all day today.”

“Seiya! You only have a few hours left until it gets dark! He’s not going to be able to help much longer!”

“Don’t worry. I have a plan.”

“A plan...? S-Seiya, what are you planning on doing?”

With little to say, the Hero briskly walks through the sanctuary with an air of confidence, but all I feel is fear.

“G-good morning, Seiya...”

Boros greets Seiya with a face that suggests he’s still feeling weird about yesterday. While I expected Seiya not to care and to demand they get started right away, he takes me by surprise and lowers his head to Boros in an uncomfortable manner.

“I’m sorry for my behavior yesterday. In my eagerness to save the parallel world, I feel I was being a little too impatient with you. Let’s do things your way today, and I’ll make sure to finish before it gets dark.”

““What?””

Both Boros and I stare in utter astonishment. I’ve never seen Seiya like this. I mean, this *is* what a normal person would do, but still...

“O-oh, really? I’m relieved to hear that!”

“Good. Now, before we get started...”

Seiya looks around.

“I want to learn how to actually create rock-type monsters today, but I don’t want to create golems and ruin this beautiful field of flowers.”

The Hero approaches Boros and pats him on the shoulder.

“Cave Along.”

Boros and Seiya gradually sink underground.

“H-hey?! Seiya, wait!”

I rush over and am sucked underground as well.

Once underground, though, I’m taken aback. It isn’t the usual narrow cavern I’m used to. Perhaps Seiya’s earth magic has gotten even more powerful through his battle against Grandleon and yesterday’s training, but the

underground cavern is massive, with at least a ten-meter radius. While walking ahead, Seiya sticks glowstones that faintly light up the area into the earthen walls.

“I’ll be able to create as many monsters as I want now without causing any trouble.”

But Boros seems somewhat dispirited.

“I appreciate that you’re looking out for the flowers, but, Seiya, we won’t be able to tell how much time has passed, since we can’t see the sun.”

“Don’t worry. I placed a clock over there.”

When I look in the direction Seiya’s pointing, I see a round clock hanging on the cavern’s dimly lit wall.

Y-yeah, that’s not suspicious at all...

Knowing Seiya, there’s more to this than he’s letting on, but Boros must be really naive, for his face is glowing with an innocent smile.

The training soon begins. From the soil, Boros creates a golem that’s over three meters tall. It’s a powerful monster made completely out of stone. Seiya tries to copy him, but he’s only able to create a golem arm with the soil. It looks like he still needs some time before he can create an entire golem.

“Good job, Seiya! Just being able to make an arm this quickly is amazing!”

Boros praises Seiya. After that, the Hero repeatedly tries and tries until he’s finally able to make a full-size golem...which almost immediately comes crumbling down. It’s just as Boros said: Creating rock-type monsters is the most difficult skill when it comes to earth magic. Even Seiya can’t pick it up in the blink of an eye like he usually does.

...How many times has he failed? Boros is starting to fidget.

“Hey, Seiya? Are we still good on time?”

But Seiya simply points at the clock with a blank stare.

“It’s still only two o’clock.”

The hand on the clock is pointing slightly past the two, and Boros’s face is

overcome with relief.

“Oh, so it is! Perfect!”

...Some more time goes by, and Seiya finally manages to create a golem. He tries to create two and three at a time, but it seems like creating multiple golems at once remains rather difficult. He still can't create more than three at a time. Boros uses this occasion to suddenly ask: “Seiya, what time is it?”

“Don't worry. It's still two.”

“Great!”

Lo and behold, it still isn't even two thirty yet according to the clock—*according to the clock...*

Hold up! Something definitely isn't right here!

I'm almost positive an hour has passed since the last time we checked! So why haven't the clock's hands moved that much?!

Ohhh! The hands on the clock must move extremely slowly! That has to be Seiya's plan! But this is so obvious that it won't be long before Boros notices!

However...

“Seiya, are we still good with time?”

“It's only two o'clock.”

“Oh, great!”

“Seiya, what time is it?”

“It's still two.”

“Oh, thank goodness!”

No matter how much time goes by, Boros doesn't seem to notice that it's forever two o'clock.

“It's so fun teaching you, Seiya!”

Boros seems to be enjoying himself a bit as well. But, well, I guess Seiya is fun to teach, since he's like a sponge that soaks up information. He's getting so into it that he probably doesn't even notice the time fly by. Nevertheless, my

internal clock is telling me that it's already night. I sneak up to Seiya and whisper into his ear: "H-hey, are you sure you should keep going like this?"

"It's fine. Learning earth magic is the priority right now."

"But..."

"It's to save Ixphoria."

"Y-you're right."

The training drags on and on during the endless hour of two o'clock. Eventually, Seiya lines up five golems, gazes at the magnificent sight, and nods.

"I've just about gotten the hang of this. That should be enough training."

"S-Seiya! Let's hurry back to the surface, then!"

Seiya undoes Cave Along, sending all of us straight back up to the surface. I gasp. Hanging over our heads are the two moons of the spirit world! An ocean of stars glitters in the sky. I timidly look at Boros...to find his knees trembling!

"Wh-wh-what is going on?! It's already nighttime!"

Unabashed, Seiya points out:

"Looks like you actually can train into the night if you put your mind to it."

I glance at Boros. His face is as white as a sheet.

What the...?!

Something feels slightly off. It was hard to notice in the dim caverns of Cave Along, but the two moons in the night sky are now illuminating Boros's face... and that's when I finally see the impressive mustache growing above his upper lip!

"What?! Did Boros always have a mustache?!"

"Mn... *Uwooooooh!*"

Boros howls with a deep roar.

"Huh?!"

The sight before my eyes shuts me right up. His mustache starts growing in each and every direction until it looks like the beard of a hermit. Thick black hair

only continues emerging from his arms and legs and even from underneath his shirt!

“Boros is getting really hairy for some reason!”

I scream in surprise. The once-kind God of Earth then shoots me a piercing glare.

“You saaaw meeeeeee!”

He reproachfully barks underneath his facial hair.

“B-Boros! What’s going on?!”

After glaring at Seiya and me for a few moments, he suddenly smirks defiantly.

“*Heh-heh-heh...* You see, I have a male god hormone imbalance that causes my body to suddenly grow body hair like this at night. As you can see, my face, arms, shins, chest, fingers, ears, and even my butt are covered in hair...”



“E-even your butt?! I-is that why you said you could only help until it gets dark outside?!”

“Exactly. I spend the entire night until dawn removing this unwanted hair. Depilatories take too long, though, so I’ve been dousing myself with weed killer.”

“What the...?! I don’t think that’s good for you!”

“Silence! I give my blood, sweat, and tears to maintain this beautiful face and body!”

The God of Earth, a deity who ludicrously thinks pouring herbicides on himself is a good idea, gazes up at the night sky and mutters: “Ishtar is the only one who knows how hairy I really am, because I’ve worked so hard keeping it a secret until now. *Heh-heh-heh...* And yet, you two just...”

I-I’ve got a bad feeling about this! Seiya has already improved his earth magic, so we should get out of here before something happens!

“Thank you for teaching Seiya earth magic, Boros! We have to get going now!”

I try to push Seiya along from behind and leave with a smile, but...

“You’re not going anywhere!!”

The dreadful black ball of fur stands before us.

“Whaddaya mean you’re leaving?! ‘Thank you’? Git outta here with that crap! You can take yer thank-you and shove it up yer ass!”

“Eek?! Since when does he have an accent?!”

Boros is no longer a sweet, handsome god but a hairy, rude hillbilly. The only thing I can think of doing is lowering my head and apologizing.

“I-I’m so sorry! I promise we won’t tell anyone!”

“Now that y’all’ve seen me like this, yer gonna spend the rest of yer lives here with me!”

“B-but we’re on a mission to save Ixphoria!”

“That ain’t got shit to do with me!”

Boros’s suspicious gaze sends a chill down my spine.

This god is just as bad as the others! There are way too many weirdos in the spirit world! What is wrong with this place?!

But Seiya quietly stares at Boros without even flinching.

“...Hey, Bigfoot.”

“Wh-who’re ya callin’ Bigfoot?!”

“You. I’m very grateful for your help. However, as Rista has already told you, we have to save Ixphoria. We don’t have time to be frolicking in the flowers with a bigfoot.”

“H-how dare ya make a fool of me! Yer gonna pay...yer gonna pay for this!!”

At once, the soil around us begins rising before instantly turning into massive stone walls.

“We’re trapped! What are we going to do, Seiya?!”

But Seiya is already charging right for Boros!

“Oh? Ya came straight for the spellcaster without even lookin’ at the walls. You’ve got a good head on yer shoulders.”

Seiya swiftly makes it to Boros and places a hand on his shoulder!

Wh-what?! He’s going to try to bury Boros with earth magic just like he did to General Jonde!

But Boros doesn’t even blink.

“Oh, that’s adorable. Are ya really tryin’ to use earth magic on the God of Earth? My resistance to earth magic is maxed out! Yer magic won’t even tickle me!”

“Oh? Then I guess I should put a little effort into it.”

The instant Seiya says that, with his arm still on Boros’s shoulder...

Whump!

“Whaaaaaat?!”

Boros yells out as he sinks to his ankles!

“Wh-what power! You buried my feet even though I have max earth resistance!”

“Lower the stone walls around us.”

But Boros smugly smirks.

“This field of flowers is my territory! My powers’re already running through the soil itself! Ya can’t beat me!”

“Hmm...”

Zoop!

Seiya’s feet sink into the ground! Boros didn’t even touch him, though!

“S-Seiya!!”

Boros then pulls his feet out of the dirt.

“Ha-ha-ha-haaa! How the tables have turned!”

The hairy deity lets out a boastful cackle while approaching Seiya as his feet are stuck underground.

“Yer gonna spend the rest of yer life takin’ care of these flowers!”

But suddenly, out of nowhere...

Wham!

A powerful *thud* echoes.

“...Googaaah?”

And Boros’s feet sink back into the ground! That’s when I notice Seiya’s fist driving into the back of Boros’s skull. The God of Earth’s eyes roll to the back of his head for a brief moment, but...

“Th-that didn’t hurt!”

He pulls his feet out of the ground and walks behind Seiya, who still can’t move.

“Y-you’ve really done it now! I’m gonna work ya like a mule all day and all

night!”

But Boros comes to a sudden stop when he reaches Seiya’s back.

“...Hffffooo?”

Seiya’s feet are still trapped underground thanks to Boros’s magic. But even so, Seiya manages to smack the back of Boros’s head with his platinum sword’s sheath without even looking. He then relentlessly continues pummeling him as if he was hammering a nail!

“Hmph.”

Boros is buried up to his thighs!

“Hmph!”

Boros is buried up to his hips!

Seiya then takes in a deep breath.

“I hope you’re ready for this. Magic: full power.”

Without missing a beat, he whacks Boros with his sheath as hard as he can.

BAM!

“Owwwwwww!”

...Boros roars one last time, but before I even realize it, he’s nowhere to be found. *W-wait... I think I see his forehead sticking out of the ground!*

The stone walls around us disappear. I rush over to Seiya as he pulls his legs out of the ground and brushes the dirt off his body.

“S-Seiya! Is Boros okay?! You only left his forehead sticking out!”

“He’ll be fine. Just like undead, deities can’t die, either.”

“B-but...!”

Paying no heed to Boros’s situation, Seiya gazes at his palm with evident satisfaction.

“Perfect. I managed to create an army of stone-type monsters without issue, and my earth magic has developed enough to bury even Bigfoot alive, despite his powerful earth resistance.”

“Stop calling him that!”

Seiya steps on the small portion of Boros’s head that’s sticking out of the ground while turning his gaze toward the beautiful moons in the sky. He then runs his fingers through his hair and says: “I’m perfectly prepared.”

“Seiya?! You’re stepping on him! You’re stepping on his head!”

The New Kingdom

Right when I'm about to create a gate to Ixphoria, Seiya adds to his order. He says he wants a gate to Galvano instead of Termine. Accordingly, I create a gate to Galvano and timidly peek inside, but there isn't a beastkin in sight.

"Seiya, you're going to tell the people of Little Light about Bunogeos and Grandleon, right?"

"There's that, but I also wanted to check on the present state of Galvano. This place will soon become the most important base following Termine."

"'Base'...?"

Seiya squats, then places a hand on the soil, causing the ground to swell. A massive golem comes crawling out of the ground. In mere seconds, the Hero creates ten golems.

"Take care of the remaining beastkin."

After a silent nod, the golems begin lumbering away.

The residents flock to us when we arrive at the underground settlement of Little Light for the first time in a while. Even the leader, Braht, is with them. He looks at us with a solemn stare, but I smile back at him and give the thumbs-up.

"W-wait... Does that mean you defeated Bunogeos?"

"Yep! We even defeated the ruler of this continent, Grandleon, as well!"

"Are you serious?! Even Grandleon...?!"

A few moments of silence go by before the crowd erupts with loud cheers. I even see Eich, the little girl who created this settlement with her earth magic, with tears in her eyes.

"Hero...thank you so much!"

But Seiya still speaks to them with his usual indifferent tone.

“That doesn’t mean you should return to the surface. There’s still a continent to the south of Rhadral where another powerful enemy resides, right?”

“Yes, the Vengeful Empress Celemonic rules over the southern continent of Kress on the other side of the ocean. They say she can use powerful sorcery.”

I’m taken by surprise as I listen to their conversation.

What?! I—I had no idea such an enemy even existed!

Normally, I should be responsible for assessing the state of things in Ixphoria so I can guide Seiya... I should be ashamed of myself...

“Until now, Grandleon has reigned over Rhadral, but once word that he’s dead spreads overseas, it’s highly possible that she’ll invade. That’s where you all have to make a choice: move the settlement to Termine or continue living underground like this.”

Eich quietly looks at the people of Little Light until Braht suddenly notices her gaze.

“I’m staying here. Galvano is my home.”

And people of all ages begin agreeing with him.

“Moving is hard when you’re old like me.”

“We’ve been living underground so long that continuing for just a bit longer would be a breeze.”

Braht approaches Seiya.

“Besides...I know you’ll be able to defeat the Vengeful Empress Celemonic in no time, too.”

He says this while softly tapping Seiya on the chest with a fist. This is probably Braht’s way of showing appreciation.

After saying good-bye to everyone in Little Light, I create a gate that leads us to the queen’s old house in Termine. General Jonde comes rushing over the instant we arrive.

“You’re already back? That was quicker than I imagined.”

But out of nowhere, Seiya throws his fist into Jonde's skull.

"What do you think you're doing?!"

"I was checking to see if you were still sane."

"Of course I am! Was I not just speaking like someone sane would?!"

Hearing the commotion, Queen Carmilla comes walking out of her home with a few guards. After surveying the area, Seiya declares: "It's time to prepare for the machine corps's invasion."

"None of your half-assed strategies are going to work against them!"

Jonde glares at Seiya.

"Listen, Ernok Castle used to rule over the continent of Baraque. Their castle was heavily guarded by elite foot soldiers and archers, but do you know what happened? They were attacked by the machine corps and destroyed in just one night!"

"'I-in just one night'?!"

I scream out in surprise, so Jonde turns his gaze on me.

"The castle was destroyed in just one night. I hear it took only three days before the entire continent was conquered."

"They took over the entire continent in just three days?! Wh-what kind of power do you have to have to be able to do that?"

"While the Machine Emperor Ozerio has extraordinary leadership skills and the power to control thousands of Killing Machines as if they were part of his own body, it appears there may be more to him than what we know."

It doesn't matter how much Seiya's earth magic has improved. Hearing that worries me. I'm sure Seiya was listening to what Jonde just told me, too, but, seemingly unfazed, he's recalling all the earth serpents he sent forth earlier in Termine. Hundreds of earth serpents gather, squirming around his feet. Obviously, they can't talk, and yet, Seiya is nodding and saying "uh-huh" like he understands what they're telling him. It's a surreal sight, but before long, the earth serpents return to the dirt from which they came.

“All right, it looks like there aren’t any more beastkin in Termine.”

“Oh, so that’s what the earth serpents were for?”

“We can’t have any of them inside here with us.”

“What do you mean by ‘inside’?”

“I’m going to close off Termine.”

Seiya holds his hand straight out as he gazes far into the distance, outside the city.

“Great Iron Wall.”

The ground starts to rumble, and the queen, Jonde, and I are all thrown off our feet.

“Wh-what the...?”

Jonde is the first to notice.

“Look at that!”

When I look in the direction he’s pointing, I see a colossal stone wall standing a few dozen meters tall on the town’s boundary. When the rumbling eventually comes to an end, I survey the area...and that’s when I notice the entire town is enclosed with stone walls!

“Wh-wh-wh-what the...?!”

Jonde and I gasp.

“The Great Iron Wall is fifty meters tall, one meter thick, and as strong as steel. Even an enemy with an attack stat over three hundred thousand would still have a hard time penetrating it.”

Wh-while the hardness is impressive...I still can’t believe he surrounded the entire Kingdom of Termine!

Eich, who built the underground settlement with her earth magic, possesses a rare, exceptional talent, but it looks like Seiya exceeds even that after his training under the God of Earth.

“I curled the walls away from Termine so that the enemy couldn’t easily climb

them. The problem is aerial attacks...”

After changing his class to Fire Spellblade, he creates a few dozen Automatic Phoenixes and sends them to the sky.

“Sending the entire Kingdom of Termine underground like Little Light would completely prevent an aerial attack, but there are numerous problems that would arise from cutting off the sunlight. This should do for now.”

Jonde, who was stunned into silence, finally speaks up.

“Well...I heard there weren’t any flying-type enemies in the machine corps.”

“I guess if they did exist, Termine would already be under attack. Nevertheless, the tides of war are always changing. Even if they don’t have any flying types now, you never know when they might succeed in creating them.”

“I—I think you’re worrying too much, but...”

Seiya changes back into an Earth Spellblade. He then sticks out his arms, and the ground begins to rumble once again.

“S-Seiya? What did you do this time?”

“I created another wall around the first wall.”

“So there are two walls surrounding the kingdom now?!”

“Yes.”

Everyone shares an awkward laugh, slightly unnerved by how cautious Seiya is, but our smiles are short-lived...for Seiya begins creating more walls around the two walls we already have.

“Hey, hey! Wasn’t Great Iron Wall supposed to be as hard as steel?”

“I’m going to make as many as I can. The kingdom will be safer this way.”

“B-but I feel like it will make things hard to see from the watchtower if you make too many...”

“That’s what the earth serpents are for. I already have serpents stationed outside the walls and hidden between them. Their eyes are linked to mine, so I’ll have no problem checking on the state of things.”

...Seiya finally takes a break after creating a five-layered wall.

“Next, I’m going to create the golems.”

Just then, some townspeople who were watching Seiya come rushing over, and two of them slide in right in front of us. One is a woman in a robe while the other is a warrior in armor.

“Greetings! I am Shallow! Hero, please use my magic however you see fit!”

“I’m Presco! If you need any extra muscle, I’m your guy!”

There are numerous other Termine residents standing behind them. Many have injuries that seem to have been dealt by the beastkin, but every one of them still has fire in their eyes.

“Wh-whoa! We’re getting new allies one after another!”

There are probably people here who blame Seiya for Termine being conquered by the beastkin, but there are still those who elect to leave the past in the past, are thankful for Seiya defeating Grandleon, and want to help him. It brings tears to my eyes. After surveying the crowd gathered around us, Seiya says: “No thanks.”

“Heeeeeey!!!” I scream. “They want to help! Be nice!”

“The enemies are machines powered by magic. They can continuously attack without stopping to eat or sleep. Simply being human already puts these people at a disadvantage.”

“Y-yeah, maybe. But I’m sure they could still help with something!”

Seiya then firmly nods.

“Farmwork. Nobody will be able to leave Termine for a while, so we will need a system to be able to provide for ourselves like Little Light. Therefore, I want all of you to start farming.”

But the warrior Presco objects.

“No! I want to use this strength I have to fight the machine corps!”

“Can you fight for a week straight without eating or drinking anything? Can you keep up the pace without sleeping?”

“Er...! I—I wouldn’t be as energetic without any food or sleep, but...!”

“Right? Now, start farming.”

“B-but my fire magic—”

“Don’t care. Use it to farm.”

“I-I’m a good archer, so I could—”

“Don’t care. Focus on farming.”

Like a crotchety old farmer, Seiya continues to stubbornly recommend farming no matter what anyone says. Before long, everyone who wanted to help begins turning on their heels and leaving, clearly fed up.

“S-Seiya! They all left!”

“Don’t care. I’m gonna make the golems now.”

I sigh while watching the Hero indifferently create golems out of soil. But...

“W-well, I’m sure this was the Hero’s way of watching out for them and avoiding any unnecessary deaths!”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that...”

The queen is struggling to be optimistic, but Seiya is staring at his golems adoringly.

“Golems are nice. They can operate semipermanently as long as their cores remain intact. Even if all living creatures on Ixphoria die out, they’ll continue to roam the land.”

“D-don’t say stuff like that!”

“Plus, golems don’t selfishly do anything they aren’t ordered to do, unlike humans. Furthermore, they’ll never betray me, since I created them. Golems are nice.”

“Ugh! I’m sure those people who wanted to help wouldn’t have betrayed you, either!”

“Perhaps. But even then, golems have absolutely zero chance of betraying me. Golems are nice.”

There's nothing more I can say to his unwavering trust in golems.

Seiya continues churning out even more golems after that. Before long, the area around us is drowning in them. To my side stand over thirty rows comprised of twenty golems each. Staring in awe at the army of six hundred golems, Jonde asks Seiya: "H-hey... How many of those do you plan on making?"

"If the enemy plans on coming at us with tens of thousands of Killing Machines, then I'm going to make tens of thousands of golems to fight back."

"You're going to make thousands of these things?! Termine is going to become a kingdom of golems!"

"What's wrong with that? In the world I'm from, there's even a country where there are more sheep than people. Having more golems than people isn't a problem."

"B-but...!"

Jonde's expression is fraught with doubt, but the queen sends him a smile.

"Jonde, the golems won't be in Termine forever. The Hero plans to take his army of golems to invade the northern continent."

"O-oh...I see."

But Seiya admits to the queen:

"No, I don't plan on leaving Termine for a while."

"What?! You're not going to attack?! Then what are all these golems for?!"

"These are only for fighting off the enemy when they attack. Not only do we have to deal with the machine corps in the north, but we also have the Vengeful Empress Celemonic in the south. We have to make sure we're ready for both of them. Worst-case scenario, they simultaneously attack us from both sides."

"I—I don't know if we have to worry about the enemies contacting each other."

"Bunogeos was able to communicate with Grandleon through a crystal ball, despite being in different towns. As long as there's even a slight chance of being attacked from both sides, then staying here is our only option. And after

finishing initial preparations here, I plan on heading to Galvano to create a stronghold nearby with my earth magic in order to deal with the Vengeful Empress of the south before she can even reach Termine.”

Struck dumb with astonishment, the queen mutters:

“I—I can’t believe what I’m hearing!”

Jonde swallows his breath as well.

“Y-you plan on fighting all by yourself, so you created golems...but despite having enough manpower, you plan on staying within the kingdom walls you created... W-would a Hero really do something like this?”

Both Jonde and the queen fail to mask their surprise when they learn that the Hero is simply going to hole up in the kingdom and wait for the enemy to attack.

Invasion

Three days have passed, yet Seiya is still creating golems all day and all night.

“According to my soldier’s report, there are currently over twenty thousand golems in total,” Jonde says with a smirk.

I look down at the sea of golems below and smirk as well. Jonde and I are surveying Termine from the top of a watchtower. It used to be the tower where the queen was held hostage, but now soldiers with good vision are stationed here to keep watch. The top of the tower also has a bird’s-eye view of the five stone walls that Seiya created around the city. He seems to have placed approximately two thousand golems around the outermost wall to reinforce Termine’s defense.

Straining his eyes at the outer wall, Jonde mutters:

“I thought he was overdoing it at first, but when I really think about it...this is probably an expression of how he feels.”

“‘How he feels’?”

“Not being able to save the world... The fall of Termine... He plans on saving the world this time, which is why he is being so careful.”

I’m kind of surprised to see Jonde rationally analyze Seiya like this, despite all the terrible things Seiya has done to him.

“Or maybe that’s just what I want to believe. I’d go mad otherwise.”

“Ha-ha-ha. I know what you mean.”

Jonde then wears a strained look.

“However...I’m sure I’ll never be able to truly forgive the man who failed to save Princess Tiana...”

Jonde is a loyal general. While I understand it’s only natural for him to care for

the queen, I feel like he is particularly devoted to Princess Tiana.

“Hey, General Jonde? What was the relationship like between you and Princess Tiana?”

“I was her swordsmanship instructor ever since she was a child. She had no aptitude for it, but she trained very hard in spite of that. Just watching her warmed my heart.”

Hmm... So he really helped me out in my previous life... Not that I remember, though...

“She used to always ride on my shoulders when she was little. The princess was always so cheerful and bright, like a beautiful flower.”

Jonde continues reminiscing about his past with Princess Tiana. When I see the look on his face, it suddenly hits me.

“Jonde...did you...?”

He seems surprised for a second after realizing what I was getting at. He makes sure there's nobody around before whispering: “I cannot hide anything from you, Goddess.”

A hint of crimson illuminates his pale cheeks. He adds: “Yes, I loved her...more than anyone else in this world.”

“...Jonde.”

I place a hand on his shoulder and say:

“Um... That's disgusting, man. You're, like...way older than she was. And sorry, but...you're not really my type. Yikes... I mean, I appreciate the thought, but...”

“What did I do to deserve that?! And why are you turning me down?! I'm not even talking about you!”

Out of nowhere, a soldier comes frantically rushing over.

“General Jonde! General Jonde!!”

“Pipe down! What do you want?!”

Jonde's reply betrays his foul mood.

“We have spotted signs of the enemy in the north!”

“...What?”

Our expressions instantly change, and we simultaneously look to the north. My eyesight greatly surpasses that of a human, and I see rows of humanoid Killing Machines marching this way. The sunlight glints off their hard, metallic bodies. They each have only one glowing red eye, and they walk bipedally like humans. Each robot is carrying a saber-like sword, and they’re coming right for us in great force.

“The machine corps...! They’ve finally made a move!”

Jonde lifts an arm into the air, signaling a soldier in the tower to loudly ring the bell.

“Tell the townspeople to go inside and not come out of their homes no matter what!”

Jonde gives orders to the soldier. In a fluster, I say to him: “I—I have to go! I have to tell Seiya!”

But before I run down the staircase, I see Seiya walking up it.

“Ah! Seiya, good timing! The machine corps is coming!”

“I know. My earth serpents already told me, which is why I came. I can get a bird’s-eye view of the current situation from up here.”

Seiya calmly walks up to the top of the tower and squints as he looks at the machine corps closing in on the outermost wall. There are a lot fewer machines than I thought there’d be. There probably aren’t even a thousand. They’re not even trying to surround Termine. Instead, they’re simply marching toward the northern walls en masse. They probably aren’t sure if Grandleon is actually dead, so they sent an advance group to check.

Jonde suddenly offers a suggestion to Seiya.

“How about surrounding the Killing Machines with all the golems protecting the other walls?”

“No. The enemies in the north might just be a diversion, so the golems will remain on standby. I still plan on only using the golems I positioned nearby to

handle the machine corps's attack."

"Mmmm..."

Jonde doesn't say another word, likely thinking Seiya has a valid point. The machine corps continues marching uniformly toward the wall in perfect synchronization, and standing before the wall are the golems that Seiya created. There is absolutely no hesitation, since neither is human. They clash almost too abruptly, and the battle begins.

W-we're going to be okay! I'm sure the golems will destroy those machines in no time!

The golems pull their arms far back to punch while the Killing Machines leap right for them with their sabers.

"What the...?!"

And what I see leaves me speechless. The Killing Machines swiftly dodge the golems' attacks, then gang up on one golem in groups of three or more like hyenas tearing apart sluggish herbivores. While golems are strong, they won't be able to withstand being simultaneously attacked from all directions. The Killing Machines slice a golem's arms and legs—causing it to fall to its knees—before shattering its core. And just like that, the golem returns to dust.

"H-hey, your golems are being slaughtered!"

Both Jonde and I are stunned. The same thing is happening everywhere I look. While some golems' punches are connecting and destroying the Killing Machines, most are being outnumbered and defeated. The situation only gets worse to the point that it's hard to watch anymore. A roaring blast from afar then shakes the watchtower. A soldier yells: "The Killing Machines broke through the northern wall!"

"Wh-what?! Already?!"

"The golems are being pushed back as well!"

I can't believe they broke through the Great Iron Wall so easily!!

Jonde clenches his teeth.

"Unbelievable...! So this is the power of the machine corps!"

Th-they're going to break through the second and third walls in a matter of minutes at this rate! And they're going to slaughter the townspeople once they're inside Termine!

I panic, but just as the Killing Machines try to rush into the second wall...

BOOM!!

A roaring *thud* echoes so powerfully that the ground shakes. As I look over in the direction of the noise, a cloud of dust rises into the air.

"Huh?!"

Jonde, all the soldiers in the watchtower, and I are baffled as to what just happened. In the midst of our confusion, Seiya mutters: "I made a pitfall between the first and second walls."

When I look back at Seiya, his arm is already stretched toward the north.

"Repair Iron Wall."

And the hole in the outermost wall immediately repairs itself!

"Th-the repaired wall segregated the machine corps from the others!"

Just as the soldier stated, the few hundred Killing Machines that fell into the pit have been separated from the reinforcements now that the outermost wall has been repaired. Before I know what's happening, the pitfall has also closed, leaving nothing more than a flat plain. Even though Seiya's trap buried a third of the Killing Machines alive, Jonde's stern expression doesn't change.

"Repairing the wall is nothing more than a stopgap! The enemy is going to break through that wall just as quickly as before!"

Even as we speak, the Killing Machines are already trying to breach the outermost wall again...but this time, they're not even leaving a scratch!

"Wh-what's going on? They broke through it so easily a second ago..."

I turn to Seiya in utter confusion.

"I made the outermost wall easily breakable at first, but I returned it to its usual hardness when I repaired it."

"What?! Why?!"

But Seiya doesn't answer. He turns on his heel, then begins descending the tower staircase.

"Seiya?! Wait! Where are you going?!"

"That should be enough for today."

"'Enough'?! There are still Killing Machines on the other side of the wall! What are you going to do about them?!"

"It's fine."

Recognizing that it would be impossible to break through the wall, the Killing Machines begin piling on one another as if to create a hill to reach the top...but their attempt is in vain due to the outwardly curled top. Furthermore, they were so focused on building the foundation that the golems are able to attack them from the side.

"Huh?!"

I gasp in surprise at the sight. The golems, which seemed to be weaker overall than the Killing Machines, are now overwhelming them. The machines try to latch on to the golems' arms but are easily tossed away, knocked to the ground, and crushed.

"That's the golems' true power. They'll be finished up in another ten minutes."

Jonde must be just as puzzled as I am. He grabs Seiya by the shoulder and stops him as he tries to leave the tower.

"W-wait! Explain yourself! This doesn't make any sense!"

Not only did he hide the golems' true power, but he purposefully made the wall weak so the Killing Machines would break through it and fall into a pit. I-it really doesn't make much sense now that I think about it!

"What are you trying to accomplish with all that?"

Seiya, presumably tired of Jonde's nagging, speaks up with irritation in his voice.

"I'm going to analyze and research the Killing Machines I trapped in the pitfall

to assure victory.”

Analysis and Discovery

Jonde and I chase after Seiya as he heads to the outskirts of town. On the way, Jonde complains: “Analyzing the enemy is something you do when you’re faced with a powerful foe, so why would you go through all this trouble? The golems were already greatly overpowering the Killing Machines...”

Seiya doesn’t answer but pinches his nose.

“Don’t walk so close to me. Your zombie stench is making me sick.”

“Ack...!”

Sigh. As rude as always, I see. But, well, Jonde *is* undead, so he does smell a little rotten. That’s when Seiya turns his frown on me.

“You too. Your zombie stench is making me sick.”

“...?! But I’m not even a zombie!”

...Discontent clouds our faces as we trail Seiya until we reach the colossal wall protecting Termine. It’s the innermost of the five layers. The moment Seiya steps before the barrier, he mutters: “Cave Along.”

As Jonde and I rush over to him so as not to be left behind, we’re suddenly pulled underground.

“Where are we?”

Jonde surveys the cavern created by Cave Along. After lighting up the tunnel, which has a radius of around five meters, Seiya starts striding ahead.

Why is he using Cave Along *here*, though?

I curiously wonder until Seiya comes to a sudden stop, walks over to the earthen wall before us, and places a hand on it.

“Clear Wall.”

The wall suddenly turns transparent.

“Eeeeeep!”

I scream, taken aback by the sight of countless Killing Machines in swarms before my eyes. Hundreds of machines crowd together in a cavern many times larger than the one we’re in.

“Are these the Killing Machines that fell into the pit?! Wait! A-are we gonna be okay?! They’re not gonna attack us, right?!”

“This wall utilizes Clear Ceiling, which makes the ground transparent, but the enemies cannot see us from the other side. Also, this barrier is two meters thick. Breaking through it wouldn’t be easy.”

Seiya begins planting earth serpents in the four corners of our cavern while explaining.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

“I placed special earth serpents in the cavern so I’d be able to hear what they’re saying on the other side. By the way, they cover the full range from low to high and can reproduce concert-like surround sound.”

D-do they really need to be able to do that?! Seiya can be so anal about the weirdest things!

Seiya then pulls yet another snake from his breast pocket and brings it toward his mouth.

“Check... Check... Check...”

He’s talking into the serpent as if he was using a microphone! The Killing Machines on the other side of the wall begin clattering about like they can hear his voice.

“Click! Click! Whrrr!”

“Vrmmm! Click! Bzz!”

The noises they make are pretty eerie.

“Silence. Enough.”

“Bzz! Click! Click!”

But no matter what Seiya says, the machines simply howl.

"S-Seiya! I don't hear anything besides groaning!"

“Yes... It would seem that they don’t understand human language...and after all that time I spent creating the high-quality speakers...”

After it becomes clear that we can't communicate with them, Seiya observes the machines in silence. He's probably using Scan, so I do the same.

KILLING MACHINE

LV: 20

HP: **MP: 0**

138,954

ATK:

85,121

98,654

85,742

Resistance: Fire, Water, Lightning, Ice, Earth, Holy, Dark, Poison, Paralysis, Sleep, Curse, Instant Death, Status Ailments

Special Abilities: Demon Lord's Blessing (LV: MAX)

Skills: Evil Laser

I'm pretty sure Grandleon's elite unit had attributes similar to this. They actually aren't much of a threat to Seiya in terms of their stats. The problem is the sheer number of them.

“I captured all these Killing Machines to study, but...their stats are all identical.”

I check the others as well. Every attribute is consistent, from attack to

defense. It's as if their statuses were all copied and pasted from one to the next.

"By the way, Seiya, what are the golems' stats like? I tried to use Scan on them, but I couldn't see anything."

"I used Fake Out on each golem, but, well...just know that they surpass the Killing Machines in all aspects."

"Then what's the point of analyzing them?" mutters Jonde.

"...For future reference."

Seiya briefly mentions this before he begins analyzing the Killing Machines.

"They're resistant to water and electricity despite being machines. I was planning on infusing the golems with whatever they were weak against, but... Hmm..."

Before I even realized it, Seiya has already begun swiftly jotting down notes with a piece of paper and a pen that seem to have appeared out of nowhere. Jonde stares at him, incredulous.

"There is something very unheroic about this. Is he really the Hero? Because he looks like a scholar to me."

Seiya does look pretty studious right now.

"Now, let's put one in a private room for a detailed analysis."

Seiya places a hand on the nearby earthen wall, turning it transparent. Inside the small cavern is a Killing Machine that has been separated from the others. Seiya then snaps his fingers, and earth serpents come falling down from the ceiling and rain over the machine.

"Click! Bzz! Click!"

The Killing Machine instantly reacts. It tries to cut through the serpents with its saber at first, but after a while, it starts shooting some sort of beam out of its eye, burning the earth serpents to death.

"That's Evil Laser. It's shooting a beam of concentrated mana out of its eye. This must be what they used to tear down the first wall so quickly."

Seiya snaps his fingers again. This time, the ground underneath the Killing Machine rises as a golem comes to life. Unlike with the serpents, however, the Killing Machine is overpowered by the golem before eating a tremendously powerful punch.

“The subject has shown no activity since its head was destroyed. There have been no signs of regeneration after the ten-minute mark.”

The machine has completely shut down, and yet, Seiya continues to stare fixedly at it. Seemingly annoyed, Jonde growls: “How long are you going to keep looking at that thing? It’s not going to regenerate!”

“Or perhaps the moment you let your guard down, it comes back to life and strikes.”

“But, Seiya...! It didn’t have the ability Regenerate when you checked its status, right?”

“Its status is only for reference. I can’t rest until I see what happens with my own eyes.”

After observing the enemy for around thirty more minutes and finally appearing convinced, Seiya stops taking notes...and then snaps his fingers again. Out of nowhere, fire comes raining down on the inactive Killing Machine’s head.

“They seem to be resistant to fire, but perhaps I can incinerate them with enough effort...”

“Wh-why would you even do that?! This makes absolutely no sense!”

Ignoring Jonde, Seiya mutters to himself:

“Let’s try water next.”

He continues his analysis and experimentation like a mad scientist, and Jonde and I soon fall silent.

...Another thirty minutes pass, and Seiya’s writing hand comes to a full stop.

“All right, that should be enough.”

“It’s about time! So what are you going to do with the rest of the Killing Machines?”

“Destroy them. They’re no longer of any use to me.”

“Knowing you, you’re not going to go fight them yourself, are you? I assume you’re planning on trapping multiple golems in there with them?”

“No, there’s a quicker way to take care of them.”

Seiya snaps his fingers as usual, causing a giant boulder one meter across to instantly fall from above the massive cavern where the Killing Machines crowd.

“Wh-what the...?!”

Googly eyes! A slit mouth! The boulder has a face!

“I learned how to create other rock-type monsters besides golems. Through combining Valkyrja techniques, fire magic, and earth magic, I was able to create a ‘bomb boulder.’ I trapped the Killing Machines to test this monster’s power in addition to my research.”

“...REEEEE!”

The Killing Machines simultaneously rush in and attack the rock monster after its sudden appearance. However...

BOOOOOOOM!!

The deafening roar is followed by a blinding light. The impact knocks me onto my rear in spite of the thick wall separating the two caverns. When I turn my gaze back toward the enclosure, the Killing Machines are in pieces.

“D-did that rock just blow itself up?!”

“Yes. Bomb boulders explode after being attacked enough, and its power... was just as incredible as I predicted it’d be. It instantly turned a few dozen of them into dust.”

A few more bomb boulders then come falling down one after another. The Killing Machines uniformly attack them, but after taking damage, the bomb boulders instantly explode. It doesn’t look like Killing Machines are highly intelligent. They don’t seem to realize that bomb boulders explode after being attacked, which explains why they continue assailing them even after seeing their comrades being blown to bits.

“If I’m successful in creating larger bomb boulders, then I can increase the explosion range even more. That said, I might blow up Termine as well if I make one too big.”

“...?! Don’t even joke about something like that!”

Jonde is enraged by Seiya’s inexcusable remark...but, well...I can’t blame him.

When the explosions eventually take out half of the Killing Machines, Seiya temporarily stops dropping bomb boulders and pulls out his notes once more.

“H-he started his analysis again!”

Jonde ends up lying sprawled out on the cavern floor.

“I’ve had enough of this! I’m going to bed!”

...Who knows how much time goes by after that? Jonde is asleep, and only the sound of Seiya’s pen gliding across the paper can be heard. Without anything to do, I’m idly staring at the cavern of Killing Machines when...

Oh? I wonder what that is.

My noticing *it* was a complete coincidence. A single Killing Machine in the corner of the spacious cavern is vibrating. I shake Jonde’s shoulders to wake him up.

“Mn...? Oh... Is it finally over?”

“No, not yet.”

“...?! You must be joking! He’s still studying the enemy?! That man is seriously ill!”

“D-don’t worry about that for now. Look over there! Is it just me, or is there something strange about that Killing Machine?”

Jonde glares at the machine I’m pointing at.

“Its behavior does seem strange, but...perhaps it broke when it fell into the pit?”

He doesn’t seem that interested, but I have no choice but to use Scan, unable to suppress my curiosity.

KILLING MACHINE

LV: 20

HP: 138,954

MP: 0

ATK: 85,121

DEF: 98,654...

It's not broken. It hasn't even lost any HP, so why...?

But as I stare at its stats, I suddenly notice something. At the very end of its status, it says: **Personality: Kindhearted**

What?! Th-that Killing Machine...has a personality?!

A Strange Machine

“Seiya! That Killing Machine is different from the rest! His status says his personality is kindhearted!”

“Mmmm...”

Seiya, who was quietly taking notes while observing what was left of the Killing Machines that were blown up, turns his gaze to the Killing Machine in the corner without saying a word.

“It appears it’s the only one with a personality out of all the Killing Machines left.”

“Why do you think that is?”

“When mass-producing the same machines in a factory, there’s a small chance that a dud gets mixed in. That one’s probably a dud.”

Seiya returns his attention to the pile of destroyed Killing Machines, then continues taking notes.

—*What the...?! That’s it?!*

I felt Seiya wasn’t acting like himself for a moment, but when I really think about it, I figure he was probably just gathering more information that could help him in battle. He’s clearly not interested in a “dud.”

Seiya eventually puts down his pen.

“All right, that should do it for now.”

“You’re finally done?!”

Jonde wears an expression of pure joy.

“Yes. All that’s left is to clean up the rest.”

When Seiya gives the signal, countless bomb boulders drop into the cavern

with the Killing Machines. The machines launch into an attack, causing explosions all over the spacious cave. But even then, I can't take my eyes off the trembling Killing Machine in the corner.

"Seiya...that Killing Machine is trembling..."

"...And?"

"And, like...I feel bad for him, y'know?"

"You feel bad for a weapon created for the sole purpose of murder?"

"...Yeah."

Both Seiya and Jonde stare at me like they're about to roll their eyes. Regardless, the Killing Machine trembling in the corner of the cave reminds me of a small child traumatized by the horrors of war. Seiya regards the unique Killing Machine with fleeting interest, but...

"A weapon with a personality... It could prove to be a valuable sample. I'll keep it separate from the others just in case."

A hole opens in the ground where the trembling Killing Machine is standing, and in the next moment, he's gone. Not long after, the Killing Machine is expelled into a small cavern nearby while the bomb boulders simultaneously explode, destroying the remaining enemies. He was no doubt saved by the skin of his teeth.

In the narrow separate cavern, the Killing Machine looks around in confusion, but before long, a bomb boulder comes falling down from above with a loud *thud*. The machine falls back onto the ground like his knees have given way, which gives me a start.

"A bomb boulder?! Why?! I thought you said he was a valuable sample!"

"I'm testing it. If it does have a high level of intelligence, then it shouldn't attack."

I stare hard at the two monsters, but the Killing Machine doesn't attack, as expected. If anything, he's terrified.

"Seiya, he's not going to attack. He's 'kindhearted,' after all."

“We’ll see about that.”

Seiya snaps his fingers, and out of nowhere, the bomb boulder adopts a wide, condescending grin.

“Hey, weakling! Come on—attack me!”

I’m taken aback by the monster’s deep voice.

“It talked! The bomb boulder just talked!!”

“I gave it the ability to compel nonaggressive enemies to attack.”

I know what Seiya means at once. The bomb boulder smugly smirks while continuing: “Hit me, ya piece of junk! Don’t just stand there, loser! Show me whatcha got! I mean, a weakling like you isn’t gonna even leave a scratch, though! Heh-heh!”

Jonde clenches his fist by my side.

“Wh-what an aggravating rock!”

“Yeah, how annoying! I mean, it’s *really* annoying! I just want to punch it in its stupid face!”

The bomb boulder continues taunting the Killing Machine while rolling around in a manner similar to dancing, making it even more annoying. Jonde and I are clenching our teeth with rage when...

“...to hit you...”

I hear a voice, but it’s not the bomb boulder’s deep baritone.

“I’m not going to hit you!”

A high-pitched squeal, similar to a little girl’s, echoes throughout the cavern!

N-no way... But it has to be! That was the Killing Machine’s voice!

“Interesting. So there are types that can talk.”

When Seiya snaps his fingers, the annoying bomb boulder sinks into the ground and disappears, leaving only the Killing Machine in the narrow cavity. Seiya then brings an earth serpent to his mouth like a mic.

“Hey, you.”

The Killing Machine looks around, indicating that he can hear Seiya's broadcast, then says: "H-hello..."

The Killing Machine has the voice of a young girl.

"Why didn't you attack the bomb boulder?"

"B-because if I did, it would have blown up... Plus, I can't even imagine attacking someone..."



The Killing Machine voluntarily begins opening up.

“I was given orders to kill the humans today...as usual...but I could never do something as horrible as kill a living creature...”

Sh-she really is kindhearted! What a strange robot!

She doesn't look any different from the other Killing Machines, but her innocent voice makes her seem so adorable. Seiya, on the other hand, is completely unmoved. He just asks her what he wants to know.

“How many others are there like you who can talk?”

“Th-there probably aren't any others besides Father...”

“‘Father’?”

“Oh! I'm talking about the Machine Emperor Oxerio. I think he's the only one who can talk...so why can I?”

“Hell if I know.”

“...I'm sorry.”

Her head droops, but before long, she lifts her chin back up with a spring in her voice.

“But I'm so happy I have someone to talk to now! The other Killing Machines only buzz and whirr whenever I try talking to them! So thank you so, so much for talking to me!”

“Shut up. I only want to know about Oxerio.”

“O-okay. I'm sorry. Please excuse me...”

H-how heartless can you be?! I'm having a hard time figuring out which one's the machine!

“Well, um...Father has four arms and four legs. And, um...”

Seiya continues asking many things after that, but he doesn't seem to get any useful information out of her. In an indifferent tone, he says: “Okay, that's enough. We're done.”

“...I'm sorry I couldn't be of any help.”

Seiya moves away from the mic. I stare at the Killing Machine left all alone in the narrow cavern until a death worm suddenly pokes its head out of the ground.

“Eek!!”

She screams. Her panic is so adorable that my lips naturally curl into a grin. Seiya, however, shoots her a subzero glare.

“I don’t trust it. It’s probably an assassin sent by Oxerio.”

“A-an assassin? *Her?*”

“Yes, ‘*her.*’ It’s probably acting like a ditz on purpose so we’ll lower our guard.”

“But wouldn’t she have been killed by the bomb boulders if I didn’t randomly happen to notice her?”

“Hmm...”

Seiya thinks for a moment, but...

“Either way, it’s better to get rid of it now instead of worrying about it later. Are you going to dispatch it?”

“What?! Jonde, no!”

I shake Jonde by the shoulders.

“What do you think you’re saying?!”

“I have no objection to the idea. After all, that Killing Machine is a monster created by the Demon Lord,” says Seiya.

“But that doesn’t make her evil! Good monsters probably exist, too!”

“I wouldn’t be so sure about that. I encountered countless beastkin in Termine during their reign, but there wasn’t a single decent monster.”

“Jonde?! What about you?! You’re not an evil monster!”

“I’m not even a monster!”

I point at Jonde as I yell:

“Seiya! You don’t need to break her, okay?! If you’re worried, then just wrap a

few earth serpents around her like you did with Jonde!”

“Don’t use me as an example!”

“We don’t even know when Jonde’s going to lose his sanity, so if we’re going to compare, then I’d say that girl is way safer to be around than he is! I mean, look at him! He’s already losing his mind!”

“No, I’m not, damn it! *Tch*. This goddess is really pissing me off right now!”

In the midst of our bitter quarreling...

“Enough already. Just shut up.”

Seiya heaves a deep sigh.

“For now, I’m going to wrap some earth serpents around it and keep it here.”

Right as I let out a deep breath of relief, Seiya turns a stern gaze on me.

“I’m only storing it as a rare sample, though. If it does anything even slightly suspicious, I’m dismantling it.”

“O-okay.”

Numerous earth serpents appear in the cavern with the Killing Machine at Seiya’s signal. However, the moment she lays eyes on them...

“Eeeeeek!”

...she screams. Unconcerned, the earth serpents wrap themselves around her neck, arms, and legs.

“S-snakes...! H-h-help!!”

She pitifully writhes on the ground, but Seiya gives the snakes more orders.

“I should stuff earth serpents in its Evil Laser cannon just in case as well.”

The Killing Machine cries and wails as the snakes even wrap around her face.

“Th-the poor thing...!”

Unable to watch any longer, I swipe the serpent mic out of Seiya’s hands.

“Hey, can you hear me?! You’re going to be okay! Those snakes won’t hurt you as long as you stay calm!”

“R-r-really...? C-can I trust you...?”

Seiya stares coldly at me.

“Rista, we have to go. We don’t have time to waste here. Now that we’ve defeated their first wave of troops, the enemy knows that humans have regained control of Termine. They’re going to come at us with everything they’ve got, so we need to make sure we’re thoroughly prepared.”

“‘Don’t have time to waste’? F-funny hearing that from someone who spent hours and hours analyzing the enemy!”

“Analyzing the enemy is absolutely necessary from a strategic perspective. All you’re doing is messing around.”

“This is serious. She—”

Jonde suddenly cuts in to the conversation.

“So what do you mean by ‘thoroughly prepared’? What exactly do you plan on doing?”

“I’m going to be focusing on preparing a defense against aerial attacks.”

...Seiya still seems to be worrying about flying-type Killing Machines, but I have to wonder if those even exist. I ask the Killing Machine: “Hey, are there any Killing Machines that can fly?”

“I-I’ve never seen one before, but...”

“Rista, you’re wasting your time. That machine doesn’t know anything. Besides, you shouldn’t blindly trust what it says.”

“Seiya, weren’t you the one interrogating her just a few minutes ago?!”

“Yes, and I took whatever it said with a grain of salt. At any rate, we need to prepare for an aerial attack. Doing so will get rid of the remaining blind spot of the five-layered Iron Wall.”

“E-excuse me...”

Suddenly, the Killing Machine speaks up. Expressing a hint of interest, Seiya grabs the mic and asks: “What’s wrong? Did you remember something?”

“No, it’s not that... *Sniffle!* It’s just...these snakes are really scary... *Sniffle!*”

Seiya tightly knits his brow.

“Let me give you one last bit of advice: Shut up. That is all.”

“Mn...! *Whimper... Sniffle... Sniffle...!*”

“Don’t you think you’re being a little too harsh?!”

I speak into the serpent mic and say:

“Don’t worry! It’s all going to be okay, so please don’t cry!”

In the middle of trying to cheer her up, I abruptly notice that Seiya is already walking an earthen staircase heading toward the surface.

“There is no reason for us to be here any longer.”

Jonde follows Seiya. I try going after them but stop when I hear the Killing Machine sob.

“Seiya, um...do you think I could stay here a little longer? I want to talk to her until she’s able to calm down.”

“You can waste all the time you want,” says Seiya as he walks away. However, he looks back one last time with a stern expression.

“You better not create a gate so you can enter the cavern with it. Got it?”

“I won’t! I’m not going to do anything like that ever again! I-I’m not kidding! I learned my lesson with Grandleon!”

“No matter what happens next time, I promise you—I will not help you even if your life depends on it.”

“I can’t believe you!!”

Jonde and Seiya leave after that, leaving only the kindhearted Killing Machine and me in the cave.

A Conversation

I can hear the Killing Machine's sobbing through the high-quality surround-sound "speakers." Facing the Killing Machine's secluded cavern, I say into the mic: "Hey, can you hear me?"

"Sniffle... Hic! Oh...! Y-yes, I can hear you!"

"I'm Ristarte. You can call me Rista. Do you have a name?"

"No."

"Then... Hmm... Well, you sound like a girl. So how about Kiriko? We can call you Kiri for short! It's cute, right?"

And then...

"Waaaaaah!"

She wails even more loudly than before.

"...?! I-I'm sorry! You don't like the name, do you?! It was probably rude of me to even give a Killing Machine a name!"

"Sniffle... No, that's not it...! I'm just...so, so...happy...!"

"Huh?"

"I never even imagined I would ever be given a name! This is like a dream come true!"

Th-thank goodness she likes it!

After that, I remind her one last time that the earth serpents wrapped around her are harmless.

"...Well, I guess I should be going."

"Rista, you're leaving already? It's going to be...so lonely without you! *Sniffle...!*"

She's gonna cry again! Uh-oh... What should I do...?

"Kiriko, just wait right there for me!"

I return to the surface and create a gate to the flower field in the spirit world.

Under the clear blue sky, I see from behind a god tilting a watering pot over the flowers.

"U-um... Hey, Boros."

I haven't seen him since Seiya buried him in the ground and stepped on his forehead.

"Oh, if it ain't Ristarte."

Boros mumbles in a deep voice as he turns around, and I am suddenly taken aback when I see his face. While he isn't covered in hair like last time, his facial hair is extremely long! Not only that, but he has a flattop haircut as well! He looks like a middle-aged biker!

Boros lets out a hearty laugh when he notices my astonishment.

"Rumors spread like wildfire after what happened, so now everyone knows about my hairiness. It's not like I came out to 'em or anything, but it feels like a huge weight has been lifted from my shoulders. So I don't bear a grudge against the Hero anymore."

"R-really?! I'm so glad to hear that!"

"It's a relief to not have to remove so much hair every day. I'm happy now. When I really thought about it, bein' hairy is one of the things that makes me me. I didn't need to hide it."

"Yeah! I like your new, wild look!"

"Do ya mean it?!"

"Of course I do! You're absolutely not my type, though!"

"W-wow... Didn't have to be so blunt about it."

"By the way, I was wondering if you could help me with something."

I point at a peach-colored, adorable flower that I've had my eye on.

“Can I have this flower?”

“Yeah, knock yourself out. I’ll put it in a flowerpot so you can carry it around more easily.”

“Thank you so much!”

“Don’t sweat it. We’re neighbors, ya hear? It’s only right we help each other.”

It’s almost as if Boros has transformed into a sweet middle-aged farmer. After he hands me the flowerpot, I return to the cave to see Kiriko.

“Sniffle... Sniffle...”

I can still hear her sobbing.

“Kiri?”

“Ah! Rista!”

I link the gate to the cavern where Kiriko is. With grim determination, I crack the door slightly...

“Hmph!”

And I artfully toss the flowerpot into the room before closing the gate quickly afterward.

“U-um... Rista? A flower just randomly flew into the room...”

This was the only way to safely give Kiriko the flower without going through the gate.

I pick up the mic.

“Kiri! That flower’s for you!”

“You’re giving this to me...?”

“Yep! It’s pretty, isn’t it?”

“Y-yeah! It’s so pretty! Just looking at it is so soothing!”

“So please don’t cry anymore, okay?”

“I’ll try not to!”

I place the serpent microphone down and have begun to leave when I hear

Kiriko timidly speak up.

“Rista...will you come visit me again?”

“Of course!”

I send her a smile.

The next day, the entire city of Termine is overrun with golems. I turn to Seiya by my side and ask: “Is it just me, or are there even more golems than before? Just how many are there?”

I wait for a while, but he doesn’t reply.

“Seiya...?”

Seiya may be a very secretive man of few words, but he is even quieter today than usual. After taking a good look, I notice his eyes are locked on to something and he isn’t all there mentally. Something is clearly wrong.

“Seiya!!”

I shake his shoulders, but he doesn’t respond.

“Seiya?! Are you okay?!”

Worried, I violently shake his shoulders, and...

Crack.

...I hear a dry *crack* followed by Seiya’s arm falling completely off!

“Eeeeeek! Did I just rip his arm off?! I’m so sorry!!”

I’m frantically apologizing while still holding his arm when I suddenly hear his voice coming from nearby.

“What are you doing?”

“Oh! Seiya! Oh man!! So, like, I was shaking Seiya when, all of a sudden, I ripped his arm off and— Wait!! What the...?!”

Perplexed, I look back and forth between the two Seiyas until the Seiya with both arms glares at me.

“That’s my body double. I used Transform on a clay doll I created with earth magic.”

“Oh... W-wow... You don’t say... Wait. ‘Body double’?! Why do you have a body double?!”

“Just because I’m in Termine doesn’t mean I’m safe. There might still be someone who wants me dead.”

“Are you saying that you think someone from Termine might attack you?! Th-that’s—”

...That’s actually not outside the realm of possibility. I’ve encountered lots of people who resent Seiya for not being able to save the world.

“My greatest enemy may not be the Demon Lord but someone close by.”

“Now you’ve gone too far! That’s ridiculous!”

Just then, a merchant-ish man approaches us with a smile and herbs in his hand. Sensing his presence, Seiya turns around incredibly fast and grabs the man by his collar.

“Eek?!”

“Who are you? An assassin?”

“N-no! I’m but a humble merchant!”

“Who sent you?”

“Nobody sent me! I was just wondering if you needed any medicinal herbs...”

Seiya doesn’t look like he believes a word this man is saying. Only when I try to calm him down does he finally let go of the merchant.

“You better not sneak up on me from behind ever again. Next time you do that, I will kill you. Got it?”

“...?! What kind of Hero says that?!”

I scream at the Hero for his hit-man-like behavior. The merchant also screams before running away. Seiya then starts walking off as if unfazed by his own cruelty.

“S-Seiya...? Where are you going?”

“To the watchtower. That’s where I was planning on going until I ran into you

and wasted valuable time.”

“The tower? Why are you—? Ah! Seiya...! Ugh! Wait for me!”

I follow Seiya to the tower. When we reach the top, Jonde and the queen are already waiting for us.

“Why did you summon us all here?”

Jonde asks this with a quizzical note in his voice. It looks like Seiya asked them to meet him here. Seiya, however, doesn’t answer and instead silently raises both arms into the air.

“...Iron Dome.”

The ground suddenly begins to roar as the Great Iron Walls around Termine extend farther toward the sky. As the walls grow, they curl inward, resembling an umbrella dome over Termine.

““Wh-wh-wh-what...?!””

As Jonde and I watch in utter astonishment, the walls from all four directions connect in the sky, completely cutting off the sun. Enshrouded in darkness, Seiya pulls out a glowstone from his breast pocket and explains: “I turned the walls into a dome to prevent aerial attacks. While it uses a lot of MP, it thoroughly defends us from attacks from above.”

“You should have told us you were going to do this! The people of Termine are probably panicking because everything suddenly went dark!”

“That’s why I called you all here. Tell the people what’s happening so no one panics when there’s an air strike.”

The dome blocking the sky slowly opens with a powerful roar before the walls gradually return to their normal position.

“Once the threat is gone, I can remove the dome like this.”

“Wh-why would somebody go to so much trouble when they don’t even know if there’s going to be an aerial attack...?”

Jonde quietly mutters to himself in a dumbfounded manner, but the queen smiles.

“Well, it’s better to be overprepared than underprepared if it ensures the safety of the people of Termine.”

Seiya nods in agreement, then walks over to the watchtower room where the queen used to be held captive. When he opens the door, I see a few wooden buckets filled with water lined up.

“S-Seiya? What are you doing?”

When Seiya snaps his fingers, each bucket of water displays a different scene.

“Ack?! What in the world is that?!”

“Using earth magic, I can display what the earth serpents inside and outside of town are seeing. This way we can see what’s happening in various places around Termine.”

The people of this world probably wouldn’t understand what a camera is, but these are essentially security cameras. With these, Seiya won’t be the only one with a bird’s-eye view of what the machine corps is doing.

A steel-solid wall that can turn into a dome in the event of an aerial attack...

Multiple security cameras set up around the area...

Termine is slowly transforming into a high-tech stronghold.

“Rista, open a gate. We’re going to Galvano.”

“What’re we going to do there?”

“I thought the enemy’s second batch of troops would be here by now, but it looks like we still have some time. So there’s no reason not to productively use this time to equip and fortify Galvano just like Termine.”

The next day, Seiya tirelessly goes back and forth between Termine and Galvano to beef up their defenses. Jonde tags along at first, but he seems to get bored after a while and instead opts to remain by the queen’s side in Termine. After opening a gate and sending Seiya to Galvano, I stay behind and hang out in Termine as well, since I figure Seiya would be annoyed if I followed him around all day. I use my spare time to talk to the queen and visit Kiriko in the cave.

“...Tee-hee. Seiya sounds so funny!”

“You wouldn’t be saying that if you had to be around him all day. He really wears you out.”

I talk with Kiriko through the earth-serpent mic. She smiles and laughs as I tell her about Seiya preparing for imaginary aerial attacks along with other overly cautious things he’s done in the past. That’s when it suddenly hits me.

“You must be having mixed feelings about all this, though. I mean, your dad is the Machine Emperor Ozerio...”

“Y-yeah, I really hope Father and the Hero can talk things out, but...”

That would obviously never happen, though. Feeling a little gloomy, I decide to change the subject.

“So how’s the flower?”

“Oh... It’s actually not doing so well...”

Kiriko picks up the flowerpot and holds it to the wall I’m facing on the other side. The flower is drooping, and the soil has completely dried out.

“Ah...! Water! I forgot to give it water!”

“Water...? Do you mean it needs more nutrients? I could pour some oil from my body onto the flower if that would help.”

“That would one hundred percent kill it! Hold on! I’m going to go fetch some water!”

Flustered, I rush over to a well in Termine to draw some water with a pail, then hurry back to the cave. I open a gate and walk into Kiriko’s cavern space, then give the flower some water. The thirsty soil absorbs the fresh water in an instant.

“Phew! That should do it for now!”

But out of nowhere, I suddenly hear Kiriko’s voice coming from behind me.

“Rista...”

That’s when I finally realize that I went into her cavern even though Seiya told me not to!

Sh-shit! Shit! Shiiiiit! I was so worried about the flower that I wasn't thinking straight!!

"We finally...get to meet up close...Rista..."

"K-Kiri...? You're joking, right? This is a joke, right?"

But her voice is different. She walks over and extends her robotic arm toward me.

"S-stop!"

Sensing danger, I scream...but Kiriko takes my hand, then mirthfully shakes it up and down. With a lively note in her voice, she cheers: "I finally get to see what you look like, Rista! This is like a dream come true!"

"Huh...?"

"You're sooo pretty! Your hair is so beautiful, too! I'm so jealous!"

"Y-you really think so?"

Thank goodness! I knew she wasn't a bad monster!

"But the flower still looks depressed..."

Now that she mentions it, the flower is still wilting even though I gave it water. Was I too late?

"Hold on. Let me try something."

I use my healing magic on the drooping flower as if I was healing a wounded person, and before long, the wilted flower springs straight up.

"Yes! It worked!"

I'm never going to hear the end of it if Seiya finds out it took everything I had to revive a drooping flower...

I inwardly laugh at myself, but Kiriko cheerfully waves her arms excitedly.

"Wow! It's a miracle!"

"W-well, I am a goddess, y'know?"

"Goddesses are amazing! That was sooo cool! I can't believe what I just saw!"

It's been so long since I've been complimented that I feel like I'm on top of the world.

"Yeah! I am amazing! I'm way better than Seiya!"

"I want to be just like you, Rista!"

Ah, how wonderful it feels to be respected again! I can't believe I almost forgot! I'm a beautiful goddess who can perform miracles!

Right as I regain my dignity as a goddess...

Hiss! Hiss!

The earth serpent wrapped around my chest begins hissing.

"R-Rista?! What is that?!"

"Oh, this? It's an earth-serpent telephone. Kiri, could you be quiet for a few seconds while I take this?"

I bring the earth serpent's tail to my ear and its head to my mouth.

"Hello? Seiya? You're in Galvano now? You're going to be coming back to Termine?"

Then, in a deep voice, I hear him say:

"You opened a gate and entered the Killing Machine's cavern, didn't you?"

"What the...?! How did you know?!"

"You can't hide anything from me."

I lower my head over and over as Seiya scolds me.

"I'm so sorry... But, um...she didn't attack me, so...? ...Oh, right. That isn't the problem, is it? ...I'm sorry... You're right... Yes... I will keep that in mind... No, I promise that next time will be... Yes... Yes, I did say that last time, too... Yes, you're right... I'm really sorry... Yes... See you soon... Okay."

After the call ends...

"R-Rista...? Is everything okay?"

I manage to give Kiriko the thumbs-up, but my thumb is trembling, which complements the strained look on my face. There isn't even a hint of divine

dignity left.

Predicament

“That Hero sounds like a really scary person.”

I nod in agreement as Kiriko trembles.

“But, well, most people are very kind and compassionate. He’s just special...in an abnormal way.”

The earth-serpent telephone suddenly rings again.

“Rista! The telephone’s ringing again!”

“Eek! Did he hear us talking about him?! No...! He’s gonna crush my boobs!”

“...?! The Hero would do that to you?!”

Hiss! Hiss! Hiss!

The snake phone continues to ring. After working up the courage, I finally answer it.

“I didn’t mean ‘abnormal’ in a bad way. I just wanted to say that you were ‘special’ and—”

“What are you talking about? Listen, my scout serpents outside of Termine have spotted the machine corps.”

“What?! Th-the second unit is already on its way?!”

“Yes. Meet me in the watchtower and bring that Killing Machine with you.”

“I can take Kiriko with me?! Seiya?! Hello?!”

After Seiya hangs up on me, Kiriko stares at me with blank amazement.

“Um...am I allowed to go outside with you?”

“Y-yeah, it looks that way. But things could get messy if the people of Termine see you, so don’t leave my side, okay?”

I don't know what Seiya's up to, but I bring Kiriko with me to the Termine watchtower.

"I-it's a Killing Machine!"

The guards get into a fighting stance the moment I open the door and step onto the top floor of the watchtower with Kiriko. Before I can even open my mouth, Seiya says to them: "Don't worry. I wrapped earth serpents all around it just like with Jonde, so I've essentially got it on a short leash just like with Jonde. I can destroy it anytime I want just like with Jonde."

All the soldiers are overcome with relief when they hear that...with the exception of Jonde.

"'Just like with Jonde. Just like with Jonde.' Did you really have to say that three times?! The nerve!"

After yelling at Seiya, Jonde glares at Kiriko.

"Do you mind telling me why you brought that Killing Machine here?"

"We're going to use it as a hostage for the negotiation."

I'm astounded by what I hear.

"What the...?! Wait! Did you let Kiriko live just so you could use her as a hostage?!"

"But the enemy is a Killing Machine, so I doubt he will be willing to negotiate. Regardless, I wasn't planning on striking a deal with him anyway, but you can never be too careful."

Huh?! If he wasn't planning to negotiate, then what's the point of a hostage?! Th-this doesn't make any sense!

I wouldn't be able to figure it out no matter how long I thought about it, so I decide to just give up. Seiya heads into the watchtower's observation room and begins surveilling the machine corps through the earth-serpent cameras.

"All right, it's about time I put up the Iron Dome."

The Killing Machines displayed on the bucket monitor still seem to be quite far from Termine, but Seiya nonetheless decides to change the walls into a

dome. After that, he continues looking up at the multiple monitors as he prepares for an aerial attack.

“Seem to be roughly ten thousand machines in the north.”

Ack! That's so many!

I quietly study the surveillance cameras with Seiya for a while until I suddenly realize something.

“Hey, Seiya? None of them is flying.”

“Looks that way.”

“See?! There aren't any flying-type Killing Machines! I knew the dome would be pointless!”

But Seiya calmly ignores Jonde's screams.

“At any rate, it shouldn't be much longer before the Killing Machines start battling the golems in the northern plains.”

When I look at the monitor, I see a legion of Killing Machines packed together as they charge, but there are just as many golems rushing in to attack.

“How many golems did you send into battle?”

“I sent around eight thousand north. They're slightly outnumbered, but it won't be a problem.”

And he wasn't lying about that. The golems barely have to swing their arms to swat the Killing Machines away like flies. From what I can see, one golem equals about three Killing Machines in battle. They end up crushing the Killing Machines so badly that the enemy isn't able to get anywhere near the outermost wall. We watch the monitor showing the fight in the north for a while, but Seiya eventually takes his eyes off it.

“It should only take another hour before the second batch of Killing Machines is completely destroyed.”

Jonde and I are overjoyed to hear about our certain victory, but...

Hiss! Hiss! Ssssss!

I hear a shrill hissing coming from the serpent phone in Seiya's breast pocket,

far different from the usual ringing.

“What?!”

Seiya unusually loses his calm demeanor.

“S-Seiya?! What’s wrong?!”

“It was from a scout serpent. They let me know when the enemy comes into contact with the first wall...”

“Wait! What?! You mean our last line of defense?! This has to be some kind of mistake!”

Jonde’s expression is overcome with surprise as well as he quickly looks at the monitor. I turn my attention to the monitors as well, but the north-, east-, and west-facing cameras all show the same thing we’ve been watching: The golems are still holding off the Killing Machines.

“Must have come in from the south...”

Upon hearing Seiya’s troubling words, I turn my attention to the live feed from the scout serpents in the south, but I still don’t see anything out of the ordinary.

“But the golems in the south are still fine! I don’t see a single Killing Machine, so why is the alarm going off?!”

In a hushed tone, Seiya replies:

“They probably broke through the bedrock underground until they passed under the outer four walls...”

“They didn’t attack from the sky but from underground?! Did they outwit us?!”

“Of course I considered the possibility of the enemy creating a tunnel underground to invade us. Therefore, I made sure that the Great Iron Walls extended underground. The walls are fifty meters aboveground and continue fifty meters below, making them one hundred meters tall altogether.”

“D-does that mean they went even farther underground and passed under the walls?!”

I hear Seiya clench his teeth.

“Just in case, I made sure to make the last wall extend one hundred meters underground, twice as long as the others, but...”

Seiya stares at the monitor displaying the area between the two innermost walls in the south. Before long, dirt is flung into the air and a Killing Machine pops out like a mole. Both Jonde and I gasp. It has a shiny, metallic blue body with drill-like arms. It’s a new type of Killing Machine.

“This isn’t good. This isn’t good at all.”

Seiya begins busily pacing around in circles. Jonde, on the other hand, starts reassuring himself that everything is going to be okay.

“B-but this is as far as they get! There is no way the enemy is going to get past the innermost wall that extends an entire hundred meters underground! That’s why it gave up and came back to the surface!”

“Y-yeah, you’re right! It’s going to be okay, isn’t it?!”

I go along with what Jonde’s saying, but Seiya bitterly replies: “No. They broke through the dense bedrock of Termine and were able to reach fifty meters underground...which means...”

I check the camera displaying the area around the innermost wall. About one hundred drill-type Killing Machines rise to the surface and thrust their arm-drills into the innermost wall! Gravel flies into the air as the wall is gradually chipped away.

“In addition to the group that returned to the surface and is trying to drill through the wall, there’s most likely another group underground, still chiseling at the bedrock in an attempt to go under the innermost wall.”

“The enemy is trying to invade Termine from two different locations?!”

Jonde, fed up, storms over to Seiya.

“This isn’t turning out like you told us it would! You said that Termine would be completely protected as long as we defended ourselves from an aerial attack!”

Seiya sharpens his eyes.

“Shut up!”

Seiya lets his emotions get the best of him for a change. He is clearly annoyed.

“S-Seiya...!”

After noticing me, Seiya lets out a deep sigh, then regains his composure.

“It looks like I don’t have much of a choice anymore.”

Seiya snaps his fingers, and the ground begins to violently rumble, shaking us along with it as the dome around Termine recedes.

“Wh-what did you do?”

“I got rid of all the walls around Termine except for the innermost. After that, I poured all my mana into the last wall, making it five times denser and longer in both directions. I would have liked to make it even denser and extend even farther into the ground, but the hard soil makes that difficult compared to extending it into the sky.”

And just like that, only one wall is left to defend Termine. It must have been a bitter decision for Seiya to make, especially since he was wrong with his prediction. Nevertheless, the wall is five times stronger now and seems to be protecting against the enemy’s drilling and underground invasion as well, thus halting the Killing Machines’ attack. But the moment I get a taste of relief...

“Stop right there! This room is off-limits! The Hero is busy!”

I hear the soldiers yelling from the watchtower’s stairwell.

“Wh-what’s going on now?!”

My curiosity draws my eyes to the noise.

“There’s something I have to tell the Hero!”

A brawny soldier shouts as the guards surround him. After a good look, I realize that it’s the soldier Seiya turned down the other day and told to go do farmwork.

“What’s the problem?”

The soldier calms down a little when he sees me.

“I was doing farmwork just like the Hero told me to when I noticed something.”

Before I even realize it, Jonde, Kiriko, and Seiya are already nearby and listening to the soldier.

“There was a light rain yesterday, which didn’t last long, but the golems inside Termine crouched down and stopped moving. And it wasn’t just me who noticed this. Lots of other people saw it, too.”

Seiya furrows his brow.

“So what are you trying to say? That golems are weak to water? Ridiculous. I have already made sure that the golems are resistant to water.”

But the soldier firmly declares:

“I know what I saw! The golems became sluggish when they were rained on!”

“Rainwater...?”

Seiya glares at me.

“Rista. Are there any monsters that aren’t resistant to water when it’s rainwater that falls directly from the sky?”

“I-it’s not totally inconceivable! Unlike well water or filtered water, rainwater contains the forces of nature, too! So maybe even golems with a resistance to water...!”

If something can go wrong, it will. When I look up, gray clouds hang over Termine. They look like they could cry at any moment.

I-if it rains, does that mean...?!

I suddenly hear a loud *bang*, which causes Kiriko and me to jump. It was the sound of Seiya kicking a table into the air. After throwing a fit, Seiya heads back to the surveillance room and starts impatiently staring at the monitors like a man possessed. His eyes frantically move around as he bites his nails. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Seiya like this before. After a few moments of silence, Jonde clicks his tongue, turns on his heel, and leaves the room to give orders to the soldiers.

“Prepare for battle! Strengthen the defense around the palace!”

“J-Jonde?!”

His is the face of a general.

“It appears I gave him too much credit. I thought his cautiousness was backed up with strength. However, it was quite the opposite. His strength comes from his cautiousness, and once that comes crumbling down, he mentally breaks down as well.”

I quietly stare at Seiya’s back after Jonde leaves.

Seiya...!

It’s been one grueling battle after another since we arrived in Ixphoria. Grandleon possessed attributes that even exceeded the Demon Lord’s, and the Machine Emperor Ozerio outwitted us. It’s only a matter of time before Termine is invaded by the Killing Machines. Seiya is extremely cautious. He always makes sure to prepare for anything, but it’s not like he can see into the future, and there is only so much a human can predict given all the possibilities in the universe. Seiya Ryuuguuin may be overly cautious, but this might be his limit.

Driven into a Corner

“Do you think Seiya’s okay?”

Kiriko asks me this outside the observation room, her voice full of concern.

“He’ll be fine! He’s just a little worked up because of everything that happened. Seiya’s mentally tough. I’m sure he’ll find a way to get himself out of this mess in no time!”

“Really?! Thank goodness!”

I told her everything was going to be okay, but deep down inside, I’m concerned. Seiya’s never really lost his cool like that before. Of course, I’m painfully aware of how he feels, but even now, the Killing Machines continue to drill at the south wall while others try to go under it...

“Are you okay, Kiri? It must be hard seeing fellow Killing Machines destroyed by the golems.”

“Y-yes, it is hard, but seeing humans being killed pains me even more...”

The kindhearted Killing Machine lowers her gaze, and I fall silent, not knowing what to say.

After that, Seiya sends around half of the golems at the north wall to the south wall. Unfortunately, the plan fails. The Killing Machines strike just as the golems turn their backs, and before long, the golems are outnumbered. In addition, those protecting the south wall are pushed back by the new Killing Machines with drills for arms. The new models’ performance is higher than the normal models’. It looks like one new version is essentially as strong as one golem.

...I should probably leave Seiya alone for now, but I feel so uneasy knowing that the enemy could break through the wall at any moment. With firm determination, I grab Kiriko and head into the observation room where Seiya is.

“So...? Have you come up with a plan yet?”

Without looking back at me, Seiya continues staring at the bucket monitor and mutters:

“I considered the possibility that they might break through the wall or go under it, so I am thinking about moving all the golems in Termine near the wall.”

“All of them? You mean the ones protecting the town and palace as well?”

“Exactly. While it would weaken our defense, this is the only thing we can do to protect the people of Termine.”

“But...what if the underground Killing Machines don’t return to the surface right away after passing beneath the wall? What if they continue until they reach the palace before showing themselves?”

Seiya’s face is shocked. He then nods to himself a few times.

“Oh, right. Yes... Yes, that’s... You’re absolutely right. I’ll come up with another plan.”

After returning his gaze to the monitors, Seiya begins nervously tapping his foot while biting his nails.

I can’t believe Seiya didn’t think of something that even I thought of!

I guess that’s just how mentally on edge he is right now. Feeling somewhat depressed, I decide to leave the room.

I wonder how long we have before the machine corps gets past the wall. But... I have to believe there’s enough time for Seiya to return to his usual composed self. While we may be cornered, it’s not all bad. Gazing into the sky from the tower, Kiriko gushes with a cheerful note in her voice:

“Rista! It looks like the sky’s clearing up!”

I look and see that the rain clouds hanging over Termine are already starting to disappear. It looks like the golems won’t be weakened by rainwater for now.

A few hours pass without anything eventful happening. I can’t see what’s going on underground in the south, but the earth-serpent surveillance cameras

are making it clear that the new Killing Machine models are also having a hard time breaking through the extra-thick southern wall. While the golems in the north were outnumbered for a while, their abilities exceed those of the normal Killing Machines, allowing them to slowly gain the upper hand once again. The situation seems to be improving gradually, but...

“The enemy is acting strange.”

There’s doubt in Jonde’s voice. He returned to the tower after giving orders to the soldiers in Termine and is watching the Killing Machines’ behavior.

“What do you mean, ‘strange’?”

“The Killing Machines in the north and south are backing off even though they aren’t losing...”

It isn’t long before Jonde’s concern takes form. Far from the tower, a cloud of dust rises into the air, followed by a rumble.

“Wh-what the...?!”

Jonde and I strain our eyes as we stare at the dust cloud.

“No way...! That’s...!”

With eyesight far better than a human’s, I instantly see the legion of Killing Machines heading toward Termine like a tidal wave. And to make matters worse...

“Th-they’re coming at us from every direction!”

I look around when I hear the soldier yell out those words, discovering that clouds of dust are, in fact, closing in on Termine. It’s as if a giant creature were trying to swallow the kingdom whole. The noisy rumbling gradually transforms into uniform, mechanical marching as the Killing Machines get close enough to individually discern. Most of them are normal Killing Machines, but there are some new models mixed in as well. Nevertheless, what’s most surprising is the sheer number of them. Jonde wipes the sweat off his forehead with his hand.

“There must be ten thousand of them—no, even more than that! Were they waiting for reinforcements?!”

“There’s no way we’re gonna be able to stop that many!”

“We can do it! If we gather all the golems in Termine and send them into battle, we should be able to fight them on an equal footing! It’s risky, but we have no choice! We have to defeat them while the sun is still out!”

“Y-yeah... Right...”

Jonde’s strategy is no different from Seiya’s earlier, and I can no longer object to that plan. There just isn’t time. After the Killing Machines join the army of reinforcements, they surround the golems protecting the outer walls. It’s a hair-trigger situation, but even then, the Killing Machines don’t move.

“Wh-what are they waiting for this time...?”

A thunderous explosion echoes from above. But after looking up, I shudder as a geometrical figure is being painted in the sky above Termine.

“A magic circle?! Don’t tell me that...!”

The bad feeling I had in my gut comes true. The magic circle glows, and the clear sky fills with dark clouds, followed by a squall of heavy rain. The golems’ movement is clearly affected as they are pelted by the vicious rainfall. They become sluggish as the horde of Killing Machines surrounds them. I even see some golems within the walls fall to their knees.

B-but why?! How did the enemy know they were weak to rain?! We just figured that out ourselves only a few moments ago! There’s no way any of this information could have leaked outside the walls!

I can’t gather my thoughts, and there’s no time to reflect. The Killing Machines attack the weakened golems in unison. The slowed golems are gradually defeated and return to dust. After getting past the golems’ defense, the Killing Machines head straight for the wall, allowing the new models to begin drilling through it.

Jonde turns on his heel and heads toward the observation room where Seiya is.

“Jonde?! What do you plan on doing?!”

“Even sending every last golem over there isn’t going to change the tide of battle! We need the Hero out there! We have no choice but to fight on the

front line ourselves!”

“B-but Seiya is in no condition to do that!”

“I don’t care! I’ll drag him out into battle myself if I have to!”

“W-wait! Let’s calm down and talk about this!”

In the middle of our argument, Jonde and I, along with Kiriko, crowd into the observation room...but I can hardly believe what I see. Seiya is sitting on a chair with his legs crossed while elegantly sipping on some tea. Jonde trembles with rage.

“A-a-are you seriously relaxing with a cup of tea?!”

“Jonde, wait! I’m sure Seiya is just trying to relax, so—”

“Do you honestly think we have time for that?! Ready yourself! We’re going into battle!”

But Seiya doesn’t look up from his tea.

“The tea in Termine has a wonderful aroma. It’s similar to what we call Darjeeling tea in my world. Simply delicious.”

After speaking with a soft tone, Seiya takes another sip. Jonde grabs him.

“Did the tea make you drunk?! The enemy’s plan worked, and the golems have been weakened! We don’t have time to waste!”

“Oh, shut up.”

Seiya suddenly splashes his tea in Jonde’s face!

“Wh-what the hell do you think you’re doing?!”

“You smell like a zombie, so I thought a little Darjeeling would make you smell better. From now on, I’m calling you the Darjeeling Zombie.”

“How dare you! I’m going to kill you, you worthless excuse for a Hero!”

Jonde is incredibly pissed, but more importantly, there’s something that stands out to me about Seiya’s ill-mannered behavior.

S-Seiya’s back to normal! I mean, there’s nothing normal about his normal behavior, but he’s back to his usual self! What the heck happened?!

Seiya ignores Jonde while staring at a certain screen displaying one earth serpent's camera. Pictured on the screen is a unique Killing Machine that's about three times larger than normal ones and has four arms and four legs. Staring at the spiderlike mechanical monster on the screen, Kiriko mutters:

"Father...!"

Th-that's the Machine Emperor Oxerio?! If the general himself is here, that must mean that they're coming at us with everything they've got with this third wave of enemies! They plan on finishing this battle!

"This monitor is displaying what an earth serpent installed on the south wall is seeing. I set it up so we could communicate through it as well. Give it a try."

Seiya holds an earth serpent out to Kiriko. She timidly picks it up before speaking to Oxerio through it like with a microphone.

"F-Father? Can you hear me?"

After a few moments of silence...

"...Is that the Killing Machine who was captured by the humans?"

Unlike Kiriko's, Oxerio's voice sounds forced and robotic.

"I will not negotiate. Whether or not they destroy you means nothing to me. I can create countless others to replace you."

Oxerio's cold, distant voice causes Kiriko to slightly tremble, but she musters the courage to continue:

"C-could you please stop attacking the humans?"

"What's gotten into you? I see no reason to halt the mission. Our army currently has a tremendous advantage over them. I unleashed a magic circle for rain with the magic device granted to me by the brindle-haired demon, thus weakening the golems. In addition, it will not be long before we can destroy the wall from all four sides. Furthermore, the drill unit was able to reach two hundred and fifty meters underground and is currently making its way underneath the wall. Nothing stands in the way of our victory."

"That's exactly why I'm asking you to stop, Father! I don't want to see any more humans killed or machines destroyed!"

“Killing humans is our duty.”

“Father...!”

Oxerio has no interest in reaching a compromise. That’s when Jonde suddenly points to one of the monitors.

“Look! That monster was telling the truth! The south wall is about to come crumbling down!”



A fissure runs through the south wall, and according to Ozerio, the other walls are like this as well. But even so, Seiya calmly declares: “Don’t worry. I’ll strengthen the walls.”

Ozerio seems to have heard Seiya as well.

“While you may be able to repair part of the wall, your mana is already at its limit. I suspect you will not be able to repair multiple spots simultaneously.”

Ack! He was even able to predict that?! Wh-what are you going to do, Seiya?!

But Seiya casually snaps his fingers and says: “Repair Iron Wall.”

Then the ground begins to rumble.

“Seiya! You regenerated the south wall that was about to break, right?!”

“No, I repaired all the walls.”

“R-really?! You had enough MP left to do that, huh?!”

“I also increased the thickness of the walls twentyfold along with extending the depth by two thousand meters.”

“...Excuse me?”

I—I must be hearing things.

“Um... Could you repeat that one more time?”

“The reinforced walls are twenty times thicker and extend two thousand meters underground. Not even an ant can get through now.”

...Jonde, Kiriko, and I all exchange gazes. Then, after a few moments of silence...

““““Whaaaaaat?!””””

We scream.

“B-but you said that you could only increase the thickness and depth by five!”

“Besides, if you could do that, then why didn’t you do it sooner?!”

“E-everyone, wait! Look at that!”

Kiriko points at multiple monitors displaying what’s happening outside the

walls. The cameras show something breaking through the ground and rising to the surface.

“Enemy reinforcements?!”

Jonde frowns, but what appears is not a new type of Killing Machine. It’s a golem over twice the size of a Killing Machine. Jonde turns to Seiya in astonishment.

“There are golems outside the wall?! When did you do that?!”

“I hid them underground around Termine before doing anything else in case of an emergency.”

Countless golems start crawling out of the ground like zombies coming out of a grave.

“How many of them are there?!”

“Around thirty thousand.”

“‘Thirty thousand’?! ”

“There are probably a little more than that, though. I made so many that I lost count.”

Seiya wasn’t lying, either. An unbelievable number of golems can now be seen on the monitors.

“I surrounded the machine corps surrounding Termine with these golems.”

The instant Seiya utters his plan, a magic circle appears in the sky over Termine once more.

“S-Seiya! It doesn’t matter how many golems there are! They’re going to be powerless against the enemy if they get rained on!”

Rain mercilessly pours onto the golems that just swarmed out of the ground like cicadas, completely soaking them.

“What the...?! ”

But they start crushing the Killing Machines as if the rain doesn’t slow them down at all! If anything, it’s like they’re unleashing their true power that they have been saving to smash, tear apart, and overwhelmingly push back the new

type of Killing Machines.

“Wh-what’s going on?! I thought rainwater was supposed to weaken them!”

Seiya sends Jonde a reproachful glare.

“The golems I created have no weaknesses.”

Secret Weapon

Seiya sips his tea in the observation room while watching the earth-serpent cameras like a man appreciating a painting.

“L-let me get this straight. You made the wall not as thick as you could so the enemy could almost break through...and you hid an army of golems underground while pretending they were weak against rain... What was the point of all that?”

Is this Hero some kind of sick masochist who purposely puts himself in situations where he could die? That’s the first thought that flashes through my mind, but Jonde seems to be wearing a more serious expression by my side.

“Wait...! Did you do that to lure the enemy’s general and entire army to Termine?”

Seiya quietly nods.

“Exactly. Making the enemy think that the golems had a weakness was a huge part of the plan. That’s what convinced Ozerio himself to attack, after all.”

What the...?! Hold on! This doesn’t make sense!

“H-how did you know the enemy would get that information?! Termine is completely surrounded by thick walls!”

But I come to a grim realization in the middle of my sentence.

“Wait... Does that mean there’s a traitor in Termine?!”

My heart races as I look around. If there really is a traitor, then how could they have leaked the information?!

Jonde and I suddenly lock eyes. He wears a confident expression with a hand on his chin.

“There can only be one person behind this.”

Jonde points at Kiriko, causing her to jump.

“M-me?! But...!”

I cut in between Kiriko and Jonde to protect her.

“How can you say that?! Kiri would never do such a thing! Stop jumping to biased conclusions without evidence, you zombie! ...Right, Seiya?”

But Seiya shakes his head.

“This Killing Machine’s sensory organs are most likely linked with OXERIO like the earth serpents’ are with me. Kiriko’s eyes and ears are OXERIO’s.”

“B-but...!”

Jonde nods emphatically at Seiya.

“So when did you first realize it?”

“I already considered it the moment I discovered the machine.”

I strain my voice as I yell:

“I’m the one who discovered her! You would have destroyed her if I hadn’t pointed out that she was different!”

“No, I was the first to discover it and purposely waited until you figured it out. If the Killing Machine did happen to share sensory organs with its creator, I was concerned that the enemy might catch on to what I was trying to do if I was the first to spot it. Therefore, I made it look like you just happened to find it.”

“Th-then...!”

“Kiriko being the leaker was merely a guess at that point, but it soon became apparent after a certain event.”

“‘A certain event’...?”

“When I covered Termine with a dome. When I was analyzing the Killing Machines, I discovered there was a system for flight built into the prototypes’ legs, which led me to the conclusion that they could produce flying-type machines or had already succeeded in creating them. However, the moment I created a dome around Termine, the Killing Machines tried to invade from underground instead. That’s when I became sure that Kiriko was leaking

information to Ozerio.”

I don’t want to believe that Kiriko’s the traitor, but what Seiya said was very convincing. I quietly stare at Kiriko.

“Kiri...is it true?”

“N-no! I wasn’t leaking—”

Jonde unsheathes his sword as Kiriko frantically flails her arms while denying the accusations.

“I will tear you apart!”

“Eek!”

Kiriko screams before hiding behind me as her body trembles in fear. She isn’t our enemy. There’s just no way.

“Stop it, Jonde!”

“Why do you protect the enemy?!”

Before we even begin to argue...

Splash!

Tea pours down Jonde’s face again. He then stares at Seiya with a crazed look in his eyes.

“Why did you pour tea on me again?!”

“Because you started smelling like a zombie again. There isn’t enough tea to make you smell good. Could you start carrying a kettle with you from now on?”

“Do you really think I would carry a teakettle with me, knowing that you’re just going to use it to douse me again?!”

“Sigh.”

Seiya lightly exhales before continuing.

“Relax. Kiriko might not be the only one that shares sensory organs with Ozerio. In fact, it would be absurd to share with just one Killing Machine, since it would have been destroyed if neither Rista nor I noticed it was different. In other words, it’s safe to assume that Ozerio can probably share sensory organs

with all the Killing Machines.”

Wearing a serious gaze, I look over at Kiriko.

“Kiri, you didn’t know, right?”

“Right! I didn’t mean to leak any information! Please believe me!”

But Jonde doesn’t avert the tip of his sword from her.

“We’d still be better off destroying it!”

“Jonde!! She said she didn’t do it on purpose! You’re both monsters, so why can’t you get along?!”

“Stop treating me like a monster!! ...Ah?!”

Jonde sheathes his sword after noticing a fresh cup of tea in Seiya’s hand.

Phew... It looks like Kiri’s going to be okay... Wait. Was this Seiya’s way of standing up for her?

There’s no actual way to know the truth, but after things calm down, Seiya quietly begins speaking as if talking to himself.

“At any rate, the hardest part was pretending that the plan had holes, since I’ve never experienced depression before.”

Wh-what the...?! I get depressed all the time... Regardless, it looks like he was acting upset so he could trick Ozerio through Kiri. What kind of Hero is this guy?!

But I feel a lot better after learning that it was all part of Seiya’s plan. In fact, the new Killing Machine models won’t be able to get into Termine anymore now that Seiya’s increased the thickness of the walls and extended them deeper into the ground. Plus, the golems have turned the tables and are now surrounding the Killing Machines along with Ozerio himself. We went from being backed into a wall to having the upper hand. However, Ozerio suddenly breaks his silence as the earth-serpent camera is locked on him.

“Established approach to handle irregular.”

I hear Ozerio’s monotone voice. A few moments go by; then all of a sudden, I hear an intense rumbling.

“Wh-what’s that sound?”

“It’s coming from outside!”

The sound grows louder the instant we rush out of the observation room. My eyes dart in the direction of the noise...and the sky past the north wall is painted red. Crimson clouds float through the air. But...they aren’t clouds. As they get closer, it becomes apparent that they’re a horde of Killing Machines. Unlike the blue drill-type machines underground, these are entirely red, and there are hundreds of them flying in orderly rows right for us!

“Flying Killing Machines?! So they really do exist!”

Jonde feverishly exclaims.

Just as Seiya predicted, the Killing Machines are flying toward Termine with their rocket legs.

Ack! The enemy came thoroughly prepared as well! He kept the flying unit on standby in the distance!

Seiya made sure he could create a dome around Termine just in case something like this happened, but there is no way he has enough MP left to do that after reinforcing the walls! But Seiya swats my concerns right out of the sky when he casually says: “Iron Dome.”

The reinforced walls extend into the skies with a roar, creating a dome to block the flying-type Killing Machines from invading.

Enveloped in darkness, I yell to Seiya:

“H-how do you still have that much MP left?!”

“I have plenty of MP left. For your information, I used ten MP reinforcing the walls a few moments ago, and I just used around five to create the dome.”

“Just how cost-efficient is that magic?!”

Despite using very high-level magic, he’s using only about enough MP to turn dirt into a rock. As I stand in admiration of his extraordinary gift for earth magic, Seiya quietly returns to the observation room. We rush after him in a fluster. Once inside, Seiya snaps his fingers, signaling the ground around Termine displayed on the monitor to crumble and rise. A familiar monster appears from underground.

“Th-that’s a bomb boulder!”

The golems pick up the bomb boulders that emerge from the earth, then launch them at the flying Killing Machines like they are throwing baseballs. While I never doubted their power, the golems’ incredible strength sends the bomb boulders right into the middle of the flying Killing Machines, causing a massive explosion. It’s almost like watching an army fire a coordinated barrage of missiles at an enemy. The bomb boulders must have been improved since I last saw them because the detonations are remarkable. One is all it takes to blow up an entire group of Killing Machines. Only a few minutes go by before the Killing Machines overhead are almost entirely wiped out. In addition, the thirty thousand or so Killing Machines underground, including the new drill types, are currently surrounded by golems and being picked apart.

Seiya watches the earth-serpent monitors for a while after that with a twinkle in his eyes until...

“All right, it looks like the flying units have been taken care of. Time to lower the dome.”

The dome shrinks until the walls have returned to their normal height. We leave the observation room to get a 360-degree view of the area from the top floor of the watchtower. Just as Seiya claimed, there isn’t a single Killing Machine left in the sky, and the golems have completely destroyed the thirty thousand invaders on the surface as well.

“I love it when a plan comes together.”

Seiya sips his tea while enjoying the show. As if he can’t believe his eyes, Jonde sputters: “H-he’s about to defeat the machine corps while drinking tea! Is this really how a Hero does battle?!”

“Who cares how he does it as long as he wins?”

I cheerfully chide Jonde. He may sound like he’s complaining, but his beaming smile says otherwise. It makes sense, though. Our victory is assured at this point. But even so, Seiya mutters: “It’s not over yet, though.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

The soldiers in the tower suddenly scream:

“A-a g-giant Killing Machine has appeared in the south!”

The instant I turn around, my body freezes.

“What is that?!”

Because the Killing Machine is as tall as the walls around Termine!

“Where did that giant monster even come from?!”

Kiriko shudders at the sight of the massive monster, which appeared without making a sound.

“F-Father...!”

Now that she mentions it, it does look like a mechanical spider like Ozerio, except for the fact that it’s over fifty meters tall!

“Kiri?! Ozerio can grow in size?!”

“I—I didn’t know, either!”

“This is bad! He’s going to destroy the south wall!”

While the walls have been reinforced, Ozerio’s punch sends violent tremors surging throughout Termine. Struggling to stand, Jode yells to Seiya: “What are you going to do now?! Surely you weren’t expecting *that* to show up!”

“Of course I was. Robots and giant mechs go hand in hand.”

“Y-you accounted for this, too?!”

“Don’t worry. I already prepared a secret weapon to fight against giant robots.”

Seiya then turns his gaze at me.

“Rista, open a gate to an area near Ozerio. It’s time to give the secret weapon its finishing touch.”

“O-okay! Leave it to me!”

While I agree to open a gate, I can’t help but think: *Seiya’s finally going outside the castle walls and to the front line himself! He must be really confident in this so-called secret weapon!*

After I open a gate that connects to an area outside Termine’s south wall,

Seiya, Jonde, Kiriko, and I walk through it. Surrounding us here and there are the remains of the Killing Machines. A few dozen meters ahead stands the giant Machine Emperor himself, punching the wall. Golems try to attack from below, but they get squashed like ants. I use Scan while staring at Oxerio’s back.

GIGANT OXERIO

LV: 99
(MAX)

HP:	MP:
3,487,570	42,475

ATK:	DEF:	SPD:	MAG:	GRW: 999
794,525	858,965	587,544	85,754	(MAX)

Resistance: Fire, Wind, Water, Lightning, Ice, Earth, Holy, Dark, Poison, Paralysis, Sleep, Curse, Instant Death, Status Ailments

Special Abilities: Dark God’s Blessing (LV: MAX), Remote Sensory Organs (LV: MAX), Transformation (LV: MAX)

Skills: SD Laser (Soul Destruction Laser), All Destruction

Personality: Ruthless

L-look at that HP! He has over three million! And his other stats are essentially on par with Ultimaesus’s stats in the data Chronoa showed me as well! While his stats are terrifying, seeing just how big he is this close up is overwhelming as well. It’s like looking at a giant moving building.

“Normal attacks are not going to work against that thing! Are you sure you can defeat it?”

“Stop worrying. I’m about to take out my secret weapon.”

Seiya stomps his foot on the ground with a *bang*, and the earth begins to quake. Then a giant hand appears behind Ozerio, a few dozen meters away from us!

“Th-that’s your secret weapon?!”

Following my initial surprise, I turn to Seiya with a smile and yell: “Oh, I get it! Your secret weapon is a giant golem that you’re going to use to fight Ozerio!”

“Not quite.”

“...What?”

Only when the creature fully emerges from the ground do I understand what Seiya meant.

...It’s wearing a familiar white dress, albeit covered in dirt.

...It has long blond hair and a face I see every morning.

It’s a giant me that’s even bigger than Gigant Ozerio. While I stare at it in mute amazement, Seiya wears a serious expression and declares: “That’s my secret weapon—Mega Rista.”

Irregular

Near the south wall of Termine, a few dozen meters from us, stand Gigant Ozerio and a massive version of me facing each other.

“S-Seiya...! ‘M-M-Mega Rista’?!”

“Mega Rista is a giant doll I created with earth magic.”

“That’s not what I’m wondering! I want to know why it looks like me!! You could have just made it look like a golem!”

“I learned that it was impossible through mana alone to create an earthen doll that’s over fifty meters tall. So I used this.”

I gasp the moment I see what Seiya pulls out of his breast pocket. There’s no way I could forget that doll that looks like it was made from golden straw.

“Is that the Ristarte Hair Doll?!”

A memento of my embarrassing past—this doll is something I made for Seiya out of my own hair so he could use it for synthesizing.

“By using this doll as a catalyst, I was able to create a giant earthen doll. But because it’s your hair, it ended up looking like you.”

Of course I’m taken aback seeing the ridiculously enlarged version of myself, but right now, there’s something even more surprising to me.

“U-um... I don’t remember giving you that doll, Seiya!”

When we were saving Gaeabrande, Mash, Elulu, and Valkyrie were all creeped out by the doll and said things like, “*Disgusting*,” “*That’s messed up*,” and “*Seriously?*” That’s why I swore never to create another one, so I didn’t. However, Seiya plainly states:

“You didn’t. That’s why I pulled your hair out and remade it while you were sleeping.”

“S-Seiya...! Again?! Seriously?!”

I’m more worried than I am angry, because I know from experience how much hair it takes to make that Ristarte Hair Doll. I timidly rub my head.

“Ahhh! The hair around my crown’s considerably thinner!”

I scream, but Seiya’s expression doesn’t change.

“I am not going to listen to any of your complaints. As I’ve already said countless times, everything I do, I do to save this world.”

“Nrgh...!”

I tightly clench my teeth together as I groan.

Give me back my hair, you stalker!

...Is what I want to say to him, but Seiya’s right. He wouldn’t have been able to create a giant doll to fight Gigant Ozerio without my hair. I take a deep breath and subdue my anger while staring at Mega Rista. I pray that this colossal version of me will be able to defeat Ozerio and that my hair won’t go to waste.

Gigant Ozerio gets into a fighting stance to attack when Mega Rista appears, but he doesn’t move after that. Mega Rista also raises her massive, long arms in front of her chest and gets into position to fight. Eventually, Ozerio makes the first move. He pulls back one of his four arms, then throws a punch at Mega Rista at an unbelievable speed for a creature of his size.

Wham!

Ozerio’s vicious fist sinks into Mega Rista’s face.

“Oof!”

She lets out a ridiculous cry that echoes throughout the entire nation of Termine.

“Seiya?! Did she just say ‘oof’?!”

“She can say simple words just like the other dolls.”

“O-oh... More importantly, is she going to be okay?!”

“Don’t worry. She has higher durability than golems. She should be able to take a fair amount of hits with no problem.”

But Oxerio’s relentless combo only continues. He punches Mega Rista using all four arms, hitting her whenever there’s an opening in her guard.

“Nrck!”

“Nrgh!”

“Urgh!”

Mega Rista grunts every time she’s hit.

“Seiya?! She’s getting beat up pretty bad! Are you sure she’ll be okay?!”

“Yes.”

I-is she really going to be okay?! It feels like I’m getting punched, and I don’t know how much more heartache I can take!

Mega Rista appears to be on the ropes, but she capitalizes on the brief opening in Gigant Oxerio’s guard when he finishes his barrage and wraps her arms around his body, including his four arms.

“Whoa?! She counterattacked!”

Gigant Oxerio tries to escape her grip, but she tightens her arms around him even more.

“W-wow! I can’t believe she’s physically overpowering him!”

The tables have turned. Aaand that’s when I first notice it. As Mega Rista tightly squeezes Oxerio, her skirt begins to ride up, revealing her pure-white panties!

“What the hell?! Hey!! You can see my underwear!”

Seiya groans:

“That’s not actually you, you know? Don’t let it bother you.”

“Y-you can see my panties! How am I supposed to not let that bother me?!”

And of all the panties they could have been, why those?! They’re no different from the ones I usually wear, save for the fact that they’re huge! Was it really

necessary for it to be this close to the real thing?!

All of a sudden, I notice that Jonde is looking up at Mega Rista with a hand on his chin.

“Hmm... Interesting...”

“What are you lookin’ at, you filthy zombie?!”



“Wh-why are you mad at me?! I’m just watching over the battle!”

“Don’t lie to me! You were checking out my panties, weren’t you?!”

While Jonde and I are arguing, Oxerio somehow manages to break free from Mega Rista and put some distance between them. From there, Oxerio’s stomach opens up with a *clang*, revealing multiple cannon-like barrels.

“A-are those...?”

Before I can even finish my sentence, beams of light shoot out and hit Mega Rista! I briefly shut my eyes before the blinding light. But the instant I reopen them, I almost faint because, despite being hit by those lasers, Mega Rista is still standing! Seiya wasn’t joking when he said she had high durability. All is well... except for the fact that the laser beams fried her hair and charred scraps of her clothing are falling to the ground! However, it becomes apparent that Seiya isn’t worried about the same thing I am.

“Don’t worry. Mega Rista still has plenty of energy.”

“Th-that’s not what I’m worried about! M-my body’s...!”

Mega Rista’s clothes are no more, and the only things covering her are a bra and panties. All she has left is her underwear!

“Don’t let it bother you.”

“How do you expect me to do that?! I’m basically naked!”

“Enough already. I told you. That’s not you.”

Sure, but her chest and figure are no different from mine! I think that to myself, but I’m too embarrassed to say it. I’m so embarrassed that my body feels like it’s on fire. The entire nation of Termine is probably watching right now. I randomly glance to my side, only to find that Jonde is still ogling mega-me.

“Hff... Hff... Hff...! Th-this is quite...!”

“Ahhh! I knew you were lookin’, you lecher! I hope you’re ready to have your eyes gouged out!”

“A-are these really things a goddess would say?!”

As Jonde and I go at it once again, Seiya watches Mega Rista constantly on the defense before muttering to himself: “While it may look like that, it’s supposed to be an upgraded giant golem...and yet, its specs are lower than I expected. Did its appearance negatively affect its capabilities?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

Not only do I feel humiliated, but his rudeness really tests my patience. But when I turn my gaze back to the battle, I notice that Mega Rista’s face is bloodred while she’s being hit. The corners of her mouth curl downward as she wears a furious expression. Then, at the very next moment, she roars: “Now... you’ve done it!!”

Taken aback by what I hear, I turn to Seiya and yell: “S-Seiya! Did you hear that?! She just said, ‘Now you’ve done it’ like she was mad!”

“Yeah, she sure did.”

After that, Mega Rista holds her fists up, rage plain on her face, while staring at Ozerio with a piercing glare.

Is she about to use her ultimate attack?!

I watch, brimming with expectation, until...

Wham!

Ozerio hits her in the cheek with a right hook!

“Oof!”

Mega Rista grunts just like she did earlier as I turn to Seiya and scream at him: “‘Now you’ve done it,’ my ass! I thought she was about to use her ultimate attack!”

“They were just words. Mega Rista doesn’t have an ultimate attack.”

“Then what was the point of saying that?!”

“It has a will of its own, so there’s nothing I can do about it.”

Seiya lets out a disappointed sigh.

“Creating monsters the way you want them is difficult. You sometimes create irregulars as well...just like that talking Killing Machine, Kiriko.”

When I look in the direction Seiya is pointing, I gasp as I spot Kiriko running to where Mega Rista and Ozerio are fighting.

“K-Kiri?!”

I immediately dash after her. She stops before Mega Rista’s feet, then looks up at Ozerio and yells out to him like a little girl.

“Father! Please stop fighting!”

Hearing Kiriko’s voice, Ozerio turns his gaze on her.

“Oh, it’s the Killing Machine that comprehends language. The Demon Lord told me that I was the only type that could converse, but...”

Ozerio’s mechanical, glowing red eyes distantly stare down at Kiriko.

“You are nothing more than an irregular created by chance during the manufacturing process. In other words, you are nothing more than one of thousands of others who act as my ears and eyes.”

“B-but...! Father...!!”

It must be painful for her to hear that, but I’m actually relieved.

This just means that Seiya was right! Ozerio is able to share sensory organs with not just Kiri but all the other Killing Machines as well!

This proves she isn’t a spy. However, Ozerio then hits Kiriko with another frightening revelation.

“‘Father’? Your parents are already dead. While general-purpose Killing Machines are powered by the Demon Lord’s mana, their cores use the souls of the slaughtered humans.”

Kiriko begins to visibly tremble.

“Y-you mean...I used to be a human?! Y-you mean my real father and mother were humans...and they’re a-already dead?!”

I’m just as flustered as Kiriko.

What?! Does that mean the Killing Machines Seiya has been destroying were really...?!

Before I even realized it, Seiya and Jonde were by my side. Ozerio's giant red eyes move from Kiriko and lock on Seiya.

"Yes, Hero, the ten thousand Killing Machines you disposed of like garbage were once humans who lived in this world."

Jonde and I freeze when we hear the shocking truth.

"N-no...!"

"S-Seiya...!"

I turn around, worried about Seiya's mental state...but he doesn't even bat an eye.

"When it comes to saving the world, a few sacrifices are inevitable. It had to be done."

Ozerio replies in a monotone voice:

"I tried to stir your emotions, but...it appears you are similar to us machines."

Kiriko, on the other hand, is crouching down with her hands on the ground, moaning in anguish.

"Kiri?! Are you okay?!"

I rush over to her and rub her back. Kiriko's iron back is cold, but in a way, it feels more human than Seiya's. From far up in the sky, Ozerio glares down at Seiya, who stands calmly, platinum sword in hand.

"Regardless, I am surprised you showed yourself, Hero. While you may have destroyed my army, it will all be for naught once I defeat you. The Demon Lord shall rejoice."

Seiya laughs through his nose with a "Hmph."

"Me being here means that my victory is already one hundred and twenty percent decided."

"Not according to my calculations."

Ozerio's stomach then opens up, revealing his laser cannons.

"SD Laser."

Black beams of light head straight for Seiya. Unlike the brightly colored lasers from earlier, these unmistakably bear Chain Destruction, which can destroy Seiya's soul as well as mine.

"Seiya!!"

I scream his name, but Seiya just calmly gives orders.

"Mega Rista, shield me."

"Aye, ayyye!"

Mega Rista replies in a goofy voice before planting herself before us with her arms spread out. The blinding light forces my eyes shut, but I don't feel anything. Mega Rista protected us like a giant wall.

"M-Mega Rista? Are you okay...?"

My concern causes those words to naturally flow off my lips, and to my surprise, she answers.

"I'm better than okay! Everything is hunky-dory!"

I almost faint when Mega Rista looks back and gives me the thumbs-up... because Oxerio's attack has blown the bra right off her chest! Fortunately, a few scraps of cloth are covering the tips of her breasts in an almost symbolic way, but she's basically giving the world a full view of the goods!

"What part of that is 'hunky-dory'?!"

I dash over to Jonde, grab his head with both hands, and twist it.

"Wh-wh-what do you think you're doing?! You're going to rip off my head!"

"Stop looking, then!! Stop looking, or I'll really do it!!"

I start turning his head hard enough to decapitate an undead until Jonde screams: "I—I won't look! I won't look, so please stop! We've got more pressing matters to worry about now! The Hero has disappeared!"

"What?!"

Those words break me out of my trance. I look behind myself, but Seiya isn't there.

“What the...?! But he was here just a few seconds ago! Where in the world could he have gone?!”

I steal a glance at Ozerio while hiding in the shadow of Mega Rista. The cannons on his stomach glow as if he’s about to fire more laser beams.

W-wait! Don’t tell me that Seiya went outside of Mega Rista’s guard?! H-he can’t...! It’s too dangerous! If that laser hits us, we’re dead!

But before Ozerio can fire another blast, I hear a familiar voice tickle my ears.

“Berserk: Phase Two.”

I turn my gaze in the direction of the voice coming from way above and notice something leap off Mega Rista’s burned Afro. It’s the Hero, wrapped in a crimson aura.

“Wait! Where were you?!”

“I was using Mega Rista’s head as a platform so I can reach giant enemies with my attacks. This is the real reason I created her.”

Seiya admits this while soaring through the air before slamming the platinum sword into Ozerio’s head.

A Great Hope

So the reason I now have a bald spot is that Seiya needed a high platform to stand on. I get the sudden urge to punch him right in his stupid face, but the perpetrator is long gone.

...Because he's currently high in the sky, attacking Oxerio's head with a platinum sword bearing a crimson aura. Seiya tears away at the monster's armor, which is probably even stronger than steel. While he can't use Flight in Ixphoria, he's somehow managing to remain airborne while twisting his body and attacking. Watching the Hero's graceful attacks slowly makes me forget why I was even angry. After finishing his combo, Seiya lands by my side as a crackling noise echoes in the background. Then, as if the damage has finally caught up with him, Oxerio's head shatters.

"Y-you did it! You landed a fatal blow!"

I rejoice with Jonde as the inside of Oxerio's head is exposed, revealing wires that sparkle like fireworks. Most people would assume that we had already won, but Oxerio isn't a living creature. He's a machine. Even losing half his head won't hinder him. At the very next moment, the cannons on his stomach begin glowing.

"Seiya! He's gonna shoot more lasers!"

I yell to Seiya, but Oxerio's stomach suddenly bursts into flames with an ear-piercing explosion. And just like that, the massive robot comes crashing down.

"What the...?!"

As I watch in astonishment, Seiya calmly says:

"I sent a few earth serpents into the cannons before attacking the skull."

"Wait. So that explosion was caused by the earth serpents?! You blew up his laser cannons?!"

“Yes. While I understand the desire to attack seamlessly, leaving the hatch on his stomach open was a poor move. You should always close a door after opening it. By the way, whenever I go out and lock the door behind me, I turn the knob and pull thirty times to make sure it’s really locked before leaving.”

“‘Thirty times’?! How do you not break the door?!”

I think doing it once or twice is enough, but this isn’t the time for debate. The enemy’s head is half-destroyed, and his stomach is damaged as well. I really believe that we’ve won this time, but the cautious Hero shakes his head.

“The battle isn’t over yet. Go hide behind Mega Rista.”

“B-but I seriously doubt he’s going to be able to do anything after taking that much damage—”

Oxerio gets back up on his feet before I can even finish my sentence. Seiya was right. He can still move. In faltering tones, Oxerio utters: “Theoretical values... Speed... Foreseeability...”

“D-did that make any sense to you?”

“He’s probably analyzing me.”

Oxerio’s eyes then light up.

“Analysis...complete...”

The Machine Emperor’s body then transforms! His arms and legs vanish with a mechanical *clang*, seemingly sucked into his body.

“Huh?! What’s going on?!”

Oxerio’s new form is reminiscent of a turtle, and I can’t figure out what he’s doing...but that’s when I see it—gun barrels on both his stomach and his back!

O-oh no...!

“SD Laser: Omnidirectional Blast.”

Gigant Oxerio anchors himself to the ground as he transforms himself into a cannon before shooting lasers out of his back! Countless blinding beams twist and turn toward Seiya like guided missiles.

“Berserk: Phase 2.6!”

Seiya promptly raises his Berserk Mode to the same level he used to defeat Grandleon, then instantly becomes a red blur. The lasers rain down like a squall, but they cannot catch the crimson flash of lightning as it scorches the ground. But even then, Oxerio pours all his remaining energy into these consecutive laser attacks.

“Living creatures can only dodge lasers coming from every direction for so long.”

Oxerio’s sinister voice echoes. The crimson trail continues to zigzag, dodging the blasts before suddenly stopping. By the time I finally get a good look at Seiya, he is already surrounded by lasers from every direction.

“S-Seiya...!”

It was as if Oxerio calculated where Seiya would stop and lured him there. Lasers are closing in on Seiya from above, behind, the sides—every angle imaginable. And yet, Seiya dashes straight forward, recklessly swinging his sword horizontally at one of the beams coming at him.

...There’s no way you can cut a laser with a sword. It looks almost like he’s making an attack out of desperation after being driven into a corner. But the moment the laser hits Seiya’s sword, it changes direction! The beam is reflected right back at Oxerio and explodes on impact! The Machine Emperor seems just as puzzled as I am.

“You reflected it? How were you able to quickly respond to a move you had never even seen before?”

“While it may have been the first time I’ve seen it, it’s merely an improved version of the general-purpose Killing Machines’ Evil Laser. In addition, I discovered that I could reflect Evil Laser with a platinum sword during my research.”

What?! Is that another one of the things he learned during his ridiculously long Killing Machine analysis?!

And just like that, Seiya transforms into a crimson beam once again. How can he freely move around faster than the eye can see while still countering with such accuracy? Almost every laser heading for Seiya is reflected back at Oxerio.

Black smoke spews out of the monster's body as he continues to be bathed in his own destructive rays.

"Cannot be analyzed... Cannot be analyzed... Cannot...be...analyzed..."

Oxerio's red eyes then slowly begin fading until he completely shuts off. I use Scan, focusing on his remaining HP.

GIGANT OXERIO

LV: 99 (MAX)

HP: 28,671/3,487,570

"Yes!! Just a little more to go!"

My voice is brimming with excitement, but Seiya still wears a stern expression as he quietly stares at Oxerio.

"No. I have to be even more careful now. I don't want to get caught up in the blast if he explodes."

"What?! Are you saying he's going to self-destruct?!"

"Probably. I saw it once on TV in my world. A robot that got backed into a corner ended up pressing a skull-shaped button and self-destructing."

"Y-yeah, but...that was just something you saw on TV, right?"

"That's not all. When I scanned Oxerio, I saw a move called All Destruction among the skills. It's highly possible that it's a self-destruct attack."

"Oh... That...actually makes sense."

"I'll finish him off with Crimson Boom before he activates his self-destruct mechanism."

Seiya lightly taps the ball of his foot on the ground, and an earth serpent emerges with two sheathed swords, which Seiya equips.

“When I hypothesized that Ozerio might have a self-destruction mechanism in his body, I was worried that the flames produced by Crimson Boom might set off the device, but a mechanism like that could accidentally blow up the possessor when attacked by an enemy. Therefore, it’s safe to say that Ozerio’s self-destruct mechanism must be something that can only be self-activated. Nevertheless, if by some chance I did cause an explosion, Crimson Boom’s blast would be able to offset it...”

While approaching Ozerio, Seiya mutters to himself as he speculates about a self-destruct mechanism that we don’t even know exists. From a distance, Ozerio already appears dead, but once Seiya gets close enough, his faded eyes light up red once more.

“Preparations...complete.”

Seiya was right!! He’s about to do something! D-does he really plan on blowing himself up?!

However...

“I’m not going to let you press your skull-shaped switch.”

The Berserk Hero already has both hands on the two swords at his waist as he charges Ozerio. The blades simultaneously slide out of their sheaths in a double arc, creating an X-shaped slash.

“Double Crimson Boom...!”

The move that defeated Grandleon returns—even more powerful than before—as Seiya wields two swords. The moment the crimson cross is carved into Ozerio’s body, he is effortlessly sent flying back until he explodes a few dozen meters away with a terrible screech, but the blast never reaches us. I don’t know if Seiya immediately reverted into an Earth Spellblade after using Crimson Boom or if he made preparations ahead of time, but a tall stone wall suddenly emerges from the ground and protects us. After a few moments go by, Seiya lowers the wall.

“I put up a stone wall just in case, but the explosion ended up being a bit lackluster.”

...I honestly still don’t know whether or not Ozerio really had a self-destruct

mechanism in his body, but there is one thing that's clear: He was completely destroyed by Double Crimson Boom. Oxerio's body is in so many pieces that not even the overly cautiously Hero could doubt that the battle is over. Seiya approaches Gigant Oxerio's parts and begins carefully dropping each one into the ground using Endless Fall. Jonde, who has been quietly watching, suddenly parts his quivering lips: "Y-you destroyed the machine corps and Machine Emperor Oxerio himself without sustaining a single scratch! You are unbelievably strong! You could have fought on the front line and won if you wanted to!"

"If I can win a battle without even fighting, then of course I'm going to do it without fighting."

"Seiya!! You're amazing! You annihilated that giant robot!"

"Ideally, I wanted to have the golems and Mega Rista deal the final blow, but unfortunately, all Mega Rista was good for was being a platform."

I feel like I'm being insulted, but when I look up, Mega Rista has a cheerful smile on her face. Yep...boobs out and everything...

"M-Mega Rista?! At least cover your chest with your hands!"

"I don't really mind! It's no big deal!"

"...?! To me it is!"

I scold the mountainous mega-me. Even now, the scraps of cloth covering the tips of her chest flutter in the wind, ready to fly away at a moment's notice.

"Listen!! Everyone's going to be able to see...th-the rest if you're not careful!"

"The rest...? Oh! You mean my nips!"

"Don't yell it!"

I glance over at Jonde after my outburst.

"Wh-what?! I told you I'm not looking!"

After he looks away from me, dignity slowly returns to the general's face before he smirks.

"At any rate, that colossal doll did a good job protecting Termine."

Jonde is overcome with emotion as he says:

“...Yeah, she did.”

In actuality, Mega Rista did far more than just act as a platform. Who could have imagined that the Hero would leap out from under her hair and strike? It's obvious that she was essential in defeating Ozerio. Seeing Mega Rista with an innocent smile as she covers her breasts naturally causes my lips to curl upward as well.

You really did a good job, Mega Rista!

As I mentally praise her, Seiya is quietly staring at her, his swords still unsheathed for some reason.

“Well, it's really big and takes up a lot of space, so I guess it's about time I destroyed it.”

“What the...?! Seiya, wait! Seiyaaaaaa!!”

Seiya sends me a puzzled gaze as I scream.

“What? Mega Rista served its purpose. I don't need it anymore.”

“That doesn't mean you should destroy her! How can you be so cruel?!”

“What's so cruel about it? It's a doll. It's not alive.”

With his cold gaze locked on Mega Rista, he asks:

“I'm going to destroy you. That's okay, right?”

“Aye, ayyye!”

“No! Not 'aye, aye'! Anyway, just don't do it, Seiya! I don't want to see a doll that looks just like me be destroyed!”

...I'm able to convince Seiya to let her stay outside the Termine walls to keep watch after that. It's kind of like letting your dog run freely outside, but it still beats destroying her. I also ask Seiya to fix her torn dress and fried hair, but he mutters: “Are you trying to piss me off? I have more important things to do.”

“Like what?”

“First, I need the golems to gather all the broken Killing Machine parts so I can

drop them deep into the planet's core with Endless Fall.”

The usual cleanup. This time, though, there's an unbelievable amount of bodies to be disposed of. Regardless, there's something worrying me more than physical labor.

“Hey, uh...are you sure you're okay, Seiya?”

I look at Seiya, trying to gauge how he feels. Ozerio told us that the Killing Machines were once human. While Seiya acted like he was okay, I can't help but wonder if he was merely putting on a calm front. However, there isn't even a hint of concern in Seiya's expression.

“There are at least ten thousand bodies that need to be disposed of. It's going to be a lot of work, but it has to be done. If even one machine out there still works, someone could get hurt. At any rate, it shouldn't take too long if I use the remaining golems.”

Disposing of the bodies is the only thing on his mind. I don't know if I should feel relieved or bothered that he doesn't seem to care.

...Anyway, Seiya left to go take care of the Killing Machines' bodies, so I walk over to Jonde.

“It's probably going to take a while, so how about we go back to Termine?”

I open a gate to the watchtower, but Jonde doesn't move. He quietly stares at Kiriko, curled up in the distance.

“Hey... What are we going to do about that?”

“You mean Kiri? We're going to bring her with us, of course.”

After finishing my sentence, I turn to Jonde with a reproachful gaze.

“Jonde! I hope you're not still thinking about destroying her!”

“O-of course not. Her soul is human, right? Destroying her would be wrong.”

“Then what's with that look on your face?”

“I was thinking about her future. Even if Kiriko was to return to Termine, it would probably be difficult for her to live as a Killing Machine.”

I gaze at Kiriko. She's a timid, sweet Killing Machine who likes flowers. She

was probably just a little girl when she was human...until the Demon Lord suddenly appeared one day, robbing her of her future.

I make a firm resolution while imagining Kiriko's life as a human and approach the cowering Killing Machine.

"Kiri, let's just head back to Termine for now, okay?"

"B-but I..."

I place a hand on her back, then speak in the most cheerful voice I can: "Hey, Kiri! Want to go on an adventure with us?"

"What?! With you and Seiya?!"

While Kiriko looks up at me in astonishment, Jonde, on the other hand, cries out incredulously: "You have got to be kidding me! Are you serious?!"

"Of course I am! After all, she won't get hurt if she's with us!"

"B-but even I have a pretty good idea what the Hero is going to have to say about this."

"I'll persuade him! It'll be fine! I'll even get on my knees, bow, and cry if I have to!"

"Where is your pride as a goddess?!"

Ignoring Jonde, I turn to Kiriko.

"Kiri, I actually used to be a human, too, before I became a goddess."

"R-Rista...? You were once...human?"

"Yep. So you and I are kind of alike."

I take Kiriko's hand.

"So come on, Kiri!"

After a brief moment of hesitation...

"Okay!"

Kiriko's reply is quite chipper.

We walk through the gate and return to Termine. All the guards in the

watchtower join hands and rejoice as we tell them of our victory. The queen, who has been in the palace under Seiya's orders for safety, comes to the tower and congratulates us as well. Then, after two hours go by...Seiya finally returns as well. I take in a deep breath to calm my racing heart. As I face the cold-blooded Hero who didn't even blink when he heard that the Killing Machines had once been human—who tried to destroy Mega Rista the moment he was done with her—I timidly ask: "H-hey, uh... Do you think we can take Kiri with us?"

A New Friend

Seiya doesn't flat-out tell me no, nor does he casually say okay. He simply turns and stares at me. A cold sweat runs down my back as he looks at me with eyes void of all emotion.

Just say something! Anything! This is making me way too uncomfortable!

All of a sudden, Kiriko, who has been hiding behind me, takes a step forward.

"P-please...! I beg of you! I promise I won't get in the way! I—I want to join you on your journey...and one day grow up to be an amazing woman like Rista!"

"Kiri...!"

Kiriko is faintly trembling. She already understands all too well how frightening Seiya can be, and yet, she mustered up the courage to speak even though she's a Killing Machine with the soul of a little girl. Seeing her like this solidifies my resolve.

Heh-heh-heh! There's no way I can hold back after seeing that... Very well! I've got no other choice! I'm going to get on the ground and bow so hard that the friction between my forehead and the ground causes sparks! I call it Ristarte's Ultimate Groveling Technique!

"Seiyaaa! I beg of you!! Pl—"

But the instant I get down on all fours...

"...Sure."

Time stops the moment Seiya answers, and it takes a few moments for me to process what just happened.

"Whaaaaaat?! I don't have to beg?! But you were so against Elulu and Mash coming with us when we were in Gaeabrande!"

"Because they were people. She's a monster, so I don't have to worry about

when and where she might die.”

I’m taken aback by his heartless reasoning, but Kiriko jumps up and down, blissfully waving her arms.

“I’m so happy! I will do everything I can to be useful!”

“You can start by carrying my stuff.”

“Okay! My pleasure!”

Kiriko cheerfully takes Seiya’s bag. Staring at the Hero’s bored-looking expression, I think: *...When all is said and done, Seiya probably understands Kiriko’s situation. Who knows what would happen to her if we weren’t around to take care of her? I’m sure that’s why Seiya decided to bring her with us—well, I’m actually not positive that’s why, but that’s what I want to believe.*

Jonde, who watched the exchange from the side, eventually walks over.

“What are you going to do now? Are you going to fight the Vengeful Empress Celemonic in the south?”

But Seiya shakes his head.

“No, there’s something I want to do even before that.”

“And what is that?”

I decide to speak up in Seiya’s place.

“Seiya plans on going to the spirit world to train.”

“What?! At a time like this?! U-usually, you w—”

I lightly pat Jonde on the shoulder before he gets too worked up.

“Come on, Jonde. We’ve done this bit enough already, and to be honest, I’m sick of it.”

“What do you mean, you’re ‘sick of it’?! What’s a ‘bit’?!”

“Anyway, we’re going to the spirit world, but we’ll be back soon, okay?”

I open a gate to the spirit world, but Jonde promptly stands in our way before we can go through it.

“Don’t worry. It won’t take long. We’ll be back in an hour.”

“...It’s not that.”

Jonde wears a serious expression.

“Surely there is a god who can help me ascend to the heavens in an instant. Would it be too much to ask to bring me with you?”

“What? Come on, Jonde. You’re fine the way you are.”

“There is nothing fine about this! I am tired of being half-dead, dreading the day I finally lose my humanity!”

It’s my fault for being too weak to help him ascend. Plus, after seeing him so serious like this, I...

“Okay.”

I have no choice but to bring him with us. After walking through the gate, we find ourselves in the unified spirit world’s plaza. Contrary to the dismal atmosphere of Ixphoria, the spirit world is clean and refreshing.

“So, Jonde, Kiri, what do you think? Pretty amazing, huh?”

But when I look back, Kiriko is holding her head while Jonde is wearing a somewhat pained expression.

“Wh-what’s wrong?”

“I don’t feel so good!”

“Me either!”

Oh no! Is the divine energy of the spirit world hurting them?!

While they may bear no ill will, that doesn’t change the fact that they’re monsters. It looks like my assumptions are correct...which means there’s only one way to settle this.

“Follow me!”

I take Kiriko’s hand and begin to dash off.

After taking their seats at Café du Cerceus, Kiriko and Jonde both look up at the owner, Cerceus, with joy.

“I feel so much better now! I don’t feel any divine energy coming from this

person!”

“Yes, it is rather comforting! It feels no different from standing next to a normal human.”

“...?! What’s that supposed to mean?!”

Cerceus is fuming, but I’m just glad I was right. There is almost no divine energy here. I gleefully smile at Cerceus, who doesn’t give off any divine energy despite being a god.

“Hey, he said the café was ‘comforting’! Shouldn’t that make you happy as the owner?”

“No! Besides, that’s not what he meant when he said that! Anyway, Rista, I hope you know you don’t give off any divine energy, either!”

“Huh?!”

Kiriko nods a few times.

“Yeah, I never feel sick when I’m around Rista.”

“S-say it ain’t so, Kiriko!!”

The moment I yell, Kiriko and Jonde cover their faces and let out anguished groans like they are staring directly into the sun.

“Don’t let it bother you. Not much time has passed since both you and Cerceus were reincarnated as deities.”

I turn around at the sound of the familiar voice to find Aria standing behind us.

Apparently, Jonde and Kiriko couldn’t directly look at her because of her blinding divine energy.

O-oh, Cerceus and I don’t have much divine energy, since we were humans in a past life. But still...I don’t like being on the same level as Cerceus...

Kiriko notices that I’m somewhat depressed, so she tries to cheer me up.

“But I’m so happy, and I have so much fun with you, Rista!”

“Kiri...!”

Feeling the love, I wrap my arms around Kiriko and hug her as Jonde talks to Aria. He probably realized that Aria is a high-ranking goddess due to her brimming divine energy.

“As I am sure you are well aware, I am undead, and I am actually looking for a deity to send me off into the heavens... Would you be able to help me?”

Aria apologetically shakes her head.

“Powerful healing magic or holy magic is necessary to send off undead. However, Rista’s true healing capabilities have been sealed, and the God of Light is currently saving another parallel world, so he isn’t here.”

Naturally, other gods in the spirit world summon heroes to save other parallel worlds as well, and unfortunately, the God of Light is one of them.

As Jonde frowns in silence, Aria sends him a smile.

“Maybe you’re better off not rushing anyway.”

“But when I think about how I’ll one day lose my humanity...”

“Your brain still hasn’t been affected as far as I can see. You should be okay for another few years at least. I guarantee it.”

“R-really?!”

Jonde breaks into a smile the moment he hears those words.

“That’s wonderful, Jonde!”

“Y-yeah, it is! Now I can focus on rebuilding Termine!”

It would probably make Queen Carmilla happy to have Jonde by her side as well. And if the queen’s happy, I’m happy.

“Then that settles it! Jonde, Kiri, just sit back and relax at Cerceus’s café until Seiya’s done training, okay?”

Both Kiriko and Jonde seem fine with that, but Cerceus complains: “Hey, don’t make decisions for me. Why do I have to babysit these monsters? I’m busy managing this entire café myself, you know?”

The café seems even quieter than usual today to me—not even Adenela’s here—but I keep that thought to myself and propose: “How about having Kiri

and Jonde help out, then?”

““Help out”? They’re monsters.”

“Oh my. You haven’t heard? Cute monsters from parallel worlds are all everyone’s talking about lately. A lot of heroes are even neglecting their missions to cuddle with them!”

“I could see that. A cute, fluffy monster could even be the café’s mascot. However...”

Cerceus trembles as he points at Kiriko and Jonde.

“Look at them! That one’s a giant hunk of metal, and that one’s a disgustingly muscular undead! Those are the exact opposites of fluffy and cuddly!”

All of a sudden, Seiya, who has been quiet this entire time, turns a stern gaze at Cerceus.

“Cerceus, I’m busy. Stop whining and look after them. Now.”

“B-but...while I respect you and wish I could help, this is just...”

Cerceus must really not want to do this, seeing as how he’s standing up to Seiya for a change. Seiya thereupon lightly taps his foot on the ground with an annoyed look on his face. The dirt under his foot slightly bulges.

“Fine. I’ll throw in a bomb boulder, too.”

A bomb boulder suddenly emerges from the ground with an eerie smirk. Cerceus cries: “Not only is that not fluffy, but that’s literally just a rock! And I’m going to go out on a limb and guess from its name, but that thing can explode, right?!”

“Yes, Cerceus, it can. It’s your choice: Take care of them or go with the explosion.”

“You’re threatening me now?! You never change! You’re sick!”

After being threatened, Cerceus reluctantly agrees to look after Jonde and Kiriko. Once that’s taken care of, Seiya is finally able to get down to business.

“Aria, I need to start training for my next enemy.”

“Okay. I can introduce you if it’s a deity I know, but...”

Aria suddenly falls silent for a few moments before looking my way and smiling.

“Before any of that, Rista, Great Goddess Ishtar said she wanted to see you. She’ll be waiting for you in the sanctuary.”

...After leaving Seiya in Aria’s hands, I walk through the sanctuary alone until I reach Ishtar’s room. I then knock on the door and let myself in. As always, the clairvoyant great goddess is perched in her usual chair with a gentle smile on her face.

“It looks like Seiya Ryuuguuin was able to defeat not only the Beast Emperor Grandleon but the Machine Emperor Ozerio as well.”

She already knew, before I even told her.

“Y-yeah! Th-things weren’t looking so good for a short while there, but it turned out to be an act, and Seiya ended up crushing Ozerio!”

After I enthusiastically ramble on, Ishtar cheerfully lets out a laugh.

“Oh-ho-ho. He defeated Grandleon in direct combat, yes? The Beast Emperor’s stats exceeded even those of the Demon Lord’s attributes from last year. There is perhaps no enemy left in Ixphoria who can defeat the Hero.”

I’m struck with astonishment the moment I hear that. While it’s obvious with a little rational thought, I didn’t even realize it until now! There was no reason to be worried about the machine corps! Seiya already defeated Grandleon, which means he’s already more than ready to defeat the Demon Lord!

“Seiya Ryuuguuin has far exceeded human limitations.”

Ishtar brilliantly smiles. It almost feels like I’m being complimented, too, which naturally makes my lips curl.

“He is truly one of the strongest among the numerous heroes out there.”

“...Hmm?”

There was something off-putting about how she worded that, so I timidly ask: “W-wait... So there’s a Hero who’s stronger than Seiya?”

“The unified spirit world has a long, rich history. There have been Heroes

stronger than Seiya Ryuuguuin. However, simply being strong isn't everything..."

Both Aria and Adenela, who have had much more goddess experience than I, have unanimously agreed that there was never and will never be a Hero like Seiya.

And yet, there have been Heroes even stronger?!

Personally, I'm starving for details, but...

"But we can talk about that some other time."

Ishtar casually changes the subject.

"The mist that swallows Ixphoria has considerably cleared up after the fall of two powerful foes—Grandleon and Ozerio. Therefore, there is something I need to tell you. You are aware there are evil spirits who can grant dark power, similar to how we deities grant Heroes our blessings in the spirit world, yes?"

"Are you talking about demons?"

"Yes. And just like with the deities of the spirit world, demons have rules they must follow as well. Just as we cannot directly kill the demon lords of parallel worlds, demons cannot directly attack Heroes, either."

So just as we summon Heroes, support them, and indirectly defeat demon lords, demons can grant powers to demon lords in order to defeat the Heroes... I guess that means the demon in Ixphoria won't be able to directly attack Seiya.

"Please be careful. The demon hiding in Ixphoria is very likely terrifyingly powerful, seeing as I cannot use my foresight or clairvoyance. In addition...I honestly cannot even imagine how the Demon Lord Ultimaerus might have changed after receiving the Dark God's Blessing."

I shudder the instant I hear that not even Ishtar, who can see the near future, can imagine it.

"Rista, please let me know if you ever learn anything about that demon—even a name or some characteristic should suffice. We can prepare for them if we know who they are. Nevertheless...demons hardly ever introduce or show themselves, so I am sure it will be difficult..."

“O-okay, I’ll let you know if I figure anything out!”

“Thank you.”

Ishtar then quietly utters:

“Oh, one more thing... I sensed the presence of two monsters when you returned to the spirit world—a soldier turned undead and a machine with the spirit of a human.”

“Oh! I-I’m so sorry I brought monsters with me to the spirit world!”

Figuring she’s going to get mad at me, I promptly bow, but Ishtar quietly shakes her head.

“It isn’t an issue. I do not sense any malice from either of them.”

“Yeah, Kiri is an extremely sweet girl, and Jonde is a good guy for an undead... Oh! But he’s kind of a perv!”

“They say that even a meeting by chance is preordained. I believe that cherishing connections is important for both humans and deities.”

Yeah, and it sounds like Jonde really took care of me when I was a human, too. It’s as if fate mysteriously brought us back together...

As I deeply ponder fate, Ishtar picks up a ball of yarn off her desk and starts knitting.

“Please have a safe journey.”

“Thank you so much!”

I bow once more before I’m about to leave the room, and then...

“Ristarte.”

Ishtar suddenly stops me on my way out. But when I turn around, I’m shocked, for there is a trace of sorrow on her face for a change.

“Could you please tell Seiya Ryuuguuin to come see me alone?”

“Alone? Okay...I’ll tell him.”

I feel that there’s something odd about her request, but she puts on her usual kindhearted smile and begins knitting once again.

Goddess of Wealth

After leaving Ishtar's room, I return to Café du Cerceus and surprisingly find Seiya and Aria still talking.

What the...?! I thought Seiya would have already started training!

That isn't the only thing that's odd, though. Seiya is clearly in a bad mood.

"Is there really nothing that can be done? What if I practice a hundred hours a day?"

"I already told you, Seiya. It's simply not possible, even for you."

As Seiya falls silent, I approach them with a beaming smile.

"Hey, Seiya! There are only twenty-four hours in a day, you know!"

Seiya glances at me, then briefly sighs. I'm wondering what's going on when Aria suddenly speaks up in his place.

"Rista, Seiya wants to train under a deity with the power to prevent curses, but that's just not possible."

"A deity with a power to prevent being cursed?"

Jonde then chimes in from the side.

"The Vengeful Empress Celemonic in the southern continent of Kress is known as the Walking Calamity. They say she can put powerful curses on her opponent. I have no idea what kind of curses they are, though."

Oh. In other words, Seiya wants to prepare for Celemonic.

"But, Aria, why can't Seiya learn from that deity?"

"There are some things that you just cannot do no matter how hard you try. For example, Seiya will never be able to use your healing magic no matter how much he trains. This isn't about talent or effort. This is a problem of inherent

characteristics, and powers to prevent curses are from the same branch as your healing magic, Rista.”

“Oh, that makes sense! That’s too bad, huh?”

It doesn’t hit me until I say it aloud:

“Wait! So couldn’t I just learn how to do it, then?!”

“Y-yes, that’s actually what I recommended to Seiya, but he doesn’t want to do that.”

Without even looking in my direction, Seiya says in disgust: “Don’t even try. It won’t end well.”

“You don’t know that!”

“I do. I can hardly remember you ever being useful.”

“I mean...sure—I guess, but...”

Seiya turns on his heel as I stumble over my words.

“Anyway, it looks like I need to come up with a new plan.”

As Seiya speedily walks off, I yell to him:

“Oh...! Seiya! Great Goddess Ishtar said she wanted to talk to you!”

Without saying a word, he lifts a hand in the air in an annoyed manner. While he can be curt, I’m sure he’ll go talk to Ishtar, knowing his personality. A few moments go by, and Aria lets out a bitter laugh.

“Well...this is Seiya. I’m sure he’ll come up with a different way to seal a curse.”

This still doesn’t make any sense to me. All our problems would be solved if I learned that skill!

“Aria! I’m gonna do it! I’m gonna learn that move!”

“What?! But Seiya...”

“It’s for just in case Seiya isn’t able to find something else to prevent being cursed! But if Seiya ends up finding a replacement even after I learn how to seal curses, then I just won’t bother him! What do you think?”

“Well...yes, I suppose you could.”

“Right? So introduce me to the God of Sealing Curses!”

I stare at Aria with an earnest gaze until she eventually nods, and I feel a fire roar to life within me. For the most part, all I have done during Seiya’s training sessions is prepare his meals. I acted more like his caretaker than someone who backs up the Hero, but my time to shine has finally arrived! I can do this! I’ll truly be able to help Seiya once I learn how to seal curses!

While I’m brimming with excitement, Aria turns to me with a serious gaze.

“All right, Rista. Go gather all the money you have lying around your room and come back when you’re done.”

“Okay! I’ll be right back! ...Wait. What?!”

“Listen, Rista. Learning how to seal curses from the God of Light would be ideal, but unfortunately, he’s out saving another parallel world right now. Furthermore, our second candidate, the God of Luminosity, Dazma, is out as well. That leaves us with our third candidate, the Goddess of Wealth, Baldr. I can introduce you to her, but to be honest, I don’t really know much about her...”

I walk through the vast Divine Forest alone, following the directions Aria gave me. My destination is in the opposite direction from where Mitis trains and where Zet resides in the Well of No Return. Eventually, the forest opens up, and I find myself standing before a residence with a tiled roof. Most buildings in the unified spirit world look similar to Western medieval architecture in Seiya’s world, but this one is very close to a Japanese temple in style and feels slightly out of place. I walk past the carp-filled pond and open the rattling wooden door.

“Excuse me? Is anyone home?”

The floor in the room before me is covered with tatami mats. There must be dozens of them. In the very back of the dojo-like room stands what appears to be an Eastern-style altar. In the center sits a person who appears to be meditating.

“Um... Excuse me? Are you Madam Baldr, the Goddess of Wealth?”

She faintly opens her eyes at the sound of my voice.

“...Yes, my dear. I am Baldr.”

She gets up and slowly walks over to me. The goddess is a plump woman who appears to be in her middle years. She is robed in a loud, glittering gold kimono with various types of jewelry and rosaries around her neck and wrists, which jingle with every step she takes.

“Now, child, what is on your mind?”

“W-well, uh... Right now, I’m in the middle of saving a parallel world...and I was wondering if you could teach me how to seal curses.”

Her face suddenly brightens with a smile.

“With my secret ritual, you would be able to seal any monster’s curse before they even cast a spell. You would even be able to remove anyone’s curse in a snap, my dear.”

“R-really?! That’s amazing! Please teach me your ways!”

“Of course! Become my pupil and obtain the power of the universe!”

Thank goodness! Getting her help was a lot easier than I thought it’d be!

“So, Madam Baldr, how long will it take to learn this secret curse-sealing ritual?”

“That all depends on you, my dear. Show me how badly you want it.”

“I’ve never been readier for anything in my life!”

This time, I’m going to be there for Seiya! With that thought in mind, I’ve clenched my fists in front of my chest when...Baldr’s face suddenly clouds over.

“Yes... Now express those feelings monetarily. Your entrance fee will be one thousand goddon.”

After seeing her rub her fingers together, gesturing for money, I scream: “What?! That’s what you meant by showing you how much I want it?!”

Baldr’s expression hardens even more.

“Do you want to save that world?!”

“Y-yes, but...! But an entrance fee?! That’s...!”

Goddon is the currency used in the spirit world. While we borrow Brahma’s powers of creation to make the necessities, we need to offer compensation for fashionable clothing made by the God of Art or luxurious houses created by the God of Architecture. That’s where goddon comes in.

“If you cannot afford the entrance fee, then this conversation ends here.”

Baldr turns her head away from me.

...I peer into my wallet. In addition to the money that Ishtar gives me every month, I get paid as a reward every time I save a parallel world, leaving me with thirty thousand goddon in total. I slide out a thousand-goddon bill from my wallet.

“O-okay, I’ll pay. Here...”

“Oh! What generosity! Thank you, my dear.”

She swipes the bill out of my hand like she’s mugging me. Anyway, let’s just get the training started!

“No, thank *you*, Madam Baldr! I’m looking forward to training under you!”

But after that, she grabs a big vase and waddles it over to me.

“This vase will increase your divine energy for sealing curses even more! And for just four thousand goddon, it is yours!”

A-a vase?!

As I stare at the vase, at a loss for words, Baldr takes out a small box and shows me countless trinkets.

“I also have curse-sealing rosaries and rings along with countless divine items that can help against curses!”

I-is this deity—?!

“Oh! Do you also happen to know of any other deities worried over curses? If you have one of your friends enroll, you could get an introduction fee as well! Then they could introduce two of their friends and—*ahem*—then your divine energy will increase tenfold!”

I stare at what appears to be a point card after she forces it into my hand.

Ahhhhhhh!! This old lady is a con artist!! This is not the kind of training I expected!

After mustering up the courage, I stuff the point card back into her hands.

“I am not interested in any divine items or getting my friends involved! Besides, isn’t there a rule that you can’t bring divine items with you to the human realm?!”

“After your purchase, all you need to do is equip the item or have it somewhere near you, and the curse-sealing properties will rub off on you! Even if you unequip the divine item and go to one of the lower realms, the effects will last three days!”

R-really...? Because I’m finding it really hard to believe anything you say!

As I turn a dubious stare at the middle-aged goddess, she raises her voice with more enthusiasm.

“Anyway, divine items are essential when sealing curses! You can only start training when you have one of these!”

Normally, I would leave without buying anything. My guilt over causing so much trouble for Seiya when he fought Grandleon is what’s keeping me here.

If this can help me help Seiya, then...!

I end up paying a total of 29,000 goddon and purchasing the divine items she showed me. Most of my money is gone now. After equipping the rings and rosaries I bought, I pick up the vase with one hand and ask Baldr: “So now we start the training, right? Let’s do this!”

But Baldr doesn’t even glance in my direction as her eyes lock on the goddon with rapt attention.

“The training is over.”

“What?! B-but...!”

“The training ended when you completed your purchase, my dear. You may go. Thank you for your patronage.”

My rage reaches its peak as I watch the plump deity count the goddon while humming.

“The training ended with my purchase, my ass! All you did was force me to buy your shitty rosaries and vase!”

“Eek?!”

The old hag squeals as I hold her by the lapel and give her a piece of my mind.

“Y-you sound like some sort of ruffian! I had no idea you were a thief?!”

“Who d’ya think you’re callin’ a thief, ya fraud! Just give me back my goddamn goddon!”

“Not so fast! I will not simply stand here and let you call me a fraud!”

Baldr rushes over to the altar and comes back with a wooden box that was being used as an offering. Inside the box is a doll wearing a kimono. It reminds me of the Japanese people in traditional garb one might see in Seiya’s world, but its hair is longer than its entire body. It’s a bit creepy.

“This is a cursed doll. Its hair grows little by little every night.”

“Y-yeah, I do feel something ominous about it, but...why would something like that even be in the spirit world?”

“I ordered it to practice sealing curses. After receiving the powers of the divine items, you simply have to chant the spell like this.”

Baldr then holds out a rosary over the doll.

“Begone, curse! Hey, heeey! Hey, hey, heeey!”

I watch with bated breath, but nothing happens. It just looks like some old lady who’s yelling and out of her mind. After a few moments go by, I grab Baldr by the lapel once more.

“All you’re doin’ is screaming, ‘Hey’!”

“P-please calm down! Look!”

A few seconds go by before I hear a light rustling, followed by every last black strand of the doll’s hair falling out.

“Th-the doll’s h-hair’s...?!”

Pointing at the doll’s smooth, bald head, Baldr proudly argues: “See? The curse has been broken! This is my true power—the power of the secret curse-sealing ritual!”

“But all you did was make the doll go bald!”

I feel like the doll’s deep-seated grudge has only gotten stronger...

“I have another doll, my dear! You give it a try!”

“Huh...?!”

She places a similar-looking doll before me, so I try to do as she did.

“B-begone, curse... H-hey, heeey...”

“You have to chant harder! You need to be more energetic! Pretend you’re at a concert and you’re cheering! Scream like you just jumped off the stage and dived into the crowd, only for security to get mad at you!”

“...?! You’re asking me to act like a self-centered jerk?!”

Feeling pressured, I desperately shake the rosary while yelling as loudly as I can.

“H-hey, heeey! Hey, hey, heeeey! Hey, h-h-heeey!”

Rustle! Rustle!

The doll’s hair begins falling out until she’s completely bald.

“Yes!! It’s bald! I made it bald!”

“Yes, you did! Congratulations!”

“H-hold on! Was all I learned how to make a doll go bald?!”

“This is the divine power of holy magic! You have mastered all I have to teach and completed your training!”

“That’s it?! Is this really all I need to do?!”

Not only did it not take long, but I feel like the quality of the training is way lower than what Seiya usually does. And what exactly did I even master anyway? Sensing that this isn’t going to lead to anything good, I look back to

find Baldr already kneeling before the altar while saying something to herself with a serious expression.



“Oh, goddon. I need more. I must have more goddon by any means...”

I feel like something is wrong as I watch her. Baldr is a deity who lives in the spirit world, so why is she so overly obsessed with goddon?

That’s when I notice Baldr gazing at a picture on the altar of a young man who could be her son.

D-don’t tell me that’s actually her son...?

So I ask her:

“Hey, Madam Baldr, can I ask you something? Why are you so obsessed with goddon?”

“Well, dear...that’s because...”

Her lips sneeringly curl.

“I want to save enough goddon to make the Baldr residence even bigger! Then I am going to live here with this handsome god—with Apollon!”

“What the...?! *That’s* the reason you’re so obsessed with money?! You greedy old hag!”

Another Matter

I head back to the café with mixed feelings, wearing rings and rosaries and carrying the vase under one arm, and the first thing I do is complain to Aria.

“Will I really be able to seal curses after training like that? I mean, that was hardly training. It was more like shopping if you ask me.”

“Hmm... It sounds like the rumors about Baldr were spot-on. A-at any rate, you were only learning how to seal curses as a fail-safe, right?”

“Yeah, but it cost me almost all the money I had, so I wish I could see at least a little difference. It’s depressing.”

Aria then creases her eyes as she gazes into mine.

“But, Rista, you are overflowing with divine energy.”

“Huh?! No way! Really?!”

I suddenly hear a cheerful voice behind me.

“Wow, Rista! You’re even brighter and more divine now!”

I turn around to find Kiriko excited and holding a tray with a cup of coffee on it. I then turn my gaze to the vase and rosaries in gaping astonishment.

These divine items really work!!

I feel a little better after learning that I didn’t totally waste my money. I smile at Kiriko as she hands me the coffee.

“Thanks, Kiri!”

“You’re welcome!”

When she cheerfully replies, I notice she’s wearing an apron. It looks like Cerceus is genuinely putting her to work.

“So how’s working with Cerceus? Has he been nice to you?”

But just then...

“What is this?!”

I hear Jonde yell. When I look over in the direction of the voice, I see Cerceus and Jonde facing each other by a table, their faces stern.

I—I knew they wouldn't get along!

I rush over.

“Come on, guys! Please don't fight!”

But there is something clearly wrong here. Jonde sends Cerceus a passionate gaze while holding a plate with a half-eaten piece of cake on it.

“I've never tasted anything so delicious in all my years!”

“R-really? Is the cake I made that good?”

“‘Good’? It's beyond that! You are a genius!”

Jonde tightly grips and shakes Cerceus's hand, much to Cerceus's surprise.

“I must do something to repay you for such an amazing treat! Please allow me to help, too! How about I start with the dishes?”

“Oh! Well, if you insist, then...”

As Cerceus stares at Jonde in blank amazement, Kiriko suddenly shows up.

“Cerceus, is it okay if I set the table like this?”

“Yeah, that should be fine...”

Even after Jonde and Kiriko leave, Cerceus idly stands in place like his soul has left his body. I decide to walk over and pat him on the shoulder.

“Congratulations, Cerceus! Looks like you found yourself some good part-time workers!”

But when Cerceus turns around, I'm even more surprised...because of the rivers of tears running down his cheeks!

“What?! Why are you crying?!”

“Mm...! It was wrong of me to judge them by their appearance just because

they're monsters! They're such good people! *Sniffle!*"

"Sure, I get that, but that doesn't mean you have to cry..."

After shedding some manly tears, Cerceus wipes off his face.

"Tell them they can stay here forever."

I return to Aria's table with a radiant smile.

"Aria! It sounds like they're really getting along!"

"Yes, it fortunately looks like they hit it off."

After I pleasantly chat with Aria for a while, her face lights up as a memory returns to her.

"By the way, Rista, Seiya came back to the café after talking to Great Goddess Ishtar, and he asked me about souls."

"About souls?"

Seiya apparently asked her about reincarnation, what souls are, and things like that. Aria curiously continues: "But he was never interested in things like that before. I told him everything I know...but he still didn't seem satisfied. He just said, *'Oh well. At any rate, I need to start training to face Celemonic,'* and left."

Seiya wants to know more about souls? Does that have anything to do with why Ishtar wanted to talk to him?

"S-so where is Seiya training now?"

"Um... I think he said something about improving Berserk Mode? Then—"

"He said *what?!'*"

D-don't tell me he's trying to learn Phase Three! But Zet said it'd kill him!

"I'm gonna go check on him! Aria, hold on to this vase for me!"

"Rista?! Let me finish. He—Ah! This vase is really heavy!"

Leaving Aria behind, I rush back to the Divine Forest. If he's trying to reach Phase Three, then he must have gone to the Well of No Return to train under Zet.

The crimson sky of nightfall reigns over the forest. The twilight glow illuminates the trees as if they have been painted with blood, giving it an eerie atmosphere unbecoming of the spirit world. I head for the Well of No Return, hoping to somehow make it back before it's completely dark. But on the way, I am stopped by a familiar voice.

"Oh my. If it isn't Rista. Where are you off to today?"

She asks while lowering her bow and arrow. It's the perverted goddess—also known as the Goddess of Archery, Mitis—who once got completely naked and tried to jump Seiya. She sends me an innocent, beautiful smile, almost making me wonder if we just imagined all our prior experiences with her.

"Oh, uh... I need to go to the Well of No Return..."

"Is that so?"

Mitis replies with a finger on her chin.

"But it must be lonely walking through these woods all by yourself. I could go with you if you wanted."

"R-really? I'd appreciate that!"

The forest is going to get only more frightening as I get closer to the well. Plus, my night vision isn't great, so it would be reassuring having someone around who knows the forest. While Mitis is a creep who pounces on any man she can get her hands on, I can relax knowing that she's harmless around other women. Therefore, I take her up on her offer.

We walk side by side through the woods while talking about my journey in Ixphoria. While it feels like it takes forever when I'm walking alone, the trip surprisingly goes by really quickly as we talk along the way. It isn't long before I can see the eerie old well.

"Oh! That's the Well of No Return!"

I dash over to it, then begin climbing down the rope ladder.

"Allow me to accompany you."

Mitis ends up coming with me, but...

“What the...?! Why?!”

I am completely shocked when I reach the bottom. The bottom of the well was a vast, open space when Seiya came here to train last time, but now Mitis and I can barely fit. It's nothing more than an old, dried-up pit, and Zet is nowhere in sight. I feel like I've lost my mind.

Z-Zet's gone?!

Countless ideas are spiraling in my head when...

“Rista.”

Mitis's voice suddenly brings me back to my senses, so I turn around...and my brain instantly stops working.

“Wh-wh-what...?!”

Mitis has taken off her dress and gotten completely nude when I wasn't looking!

“Mitis?! What in the world are you taking your clothes off for?!”

After I scream in utter confusion, Mitis slowly approaches me in the dim well.

“I train in the woods every day, all by myself... Countless days go by with no male contact whatsoever...so recently, I've been thinking...”

She looks at me seductively.

“Maybe a woman wouldn't be so bad.”

“You're kidding, right?!”

I shudder...as Mitis simultaneously wraps her arms around me.

“Come, Rista! Let us make passionate love!”

“I-I-I'm not into stuff like that!!”

But she's not even listening to me! Mitis tries to tear off my dress as she breathes heavily.

Wh-what power! And what a high sex drive!

“Hya-hyaaa-haaaa! The floodgates have burst open! There's no going back now!”

Eek! The way she's laughing and the look on her face are freaking me out! And "floodgates"?! What does that even mean?! There's no hope for this goddess! She's sick! It's like she's cursed! ...Ah!

As she pushes me onto the ground and straddles me, I realize something. I pull a rosary off my wrist and point it at her.

"H-hey, heeey! Hey, hey, hey, heeey! Begone, accursed lust!"

I chant my heart out. While Aria may have the vase, I still have plenty of rosaries and rings all over my body that I bought from Baldr! They should be at least somewhat effective!

But Mitis just blushes as I scream "hey" and bites her thumb.

"Oh my... Look who's excited! You really want it, don't you?!"

"Hey, h—No!"

But nothing happens, no matter how long I scream. Her face gets closer to mine as she gazes into my eyes rapturously. But just as I'm about to cry...

Rustle. Rustle. Rustle.

Countless fine, long white threads fall onto my face. Mitis's eyes open wide the moment she realizes that they're her hair.

"I-is that... Is that my hair?!"

I give her a stern look as she rubs her head in astonishment.

"I—I let you off easy this time, but if you try anything else, I'm gonna make you completely bald!"

Mitis lunges away from me, suddenly aware of her appearance. I guess she is a goddess, after all.

...After climbing the rope ladder out of the well, we begin walking back with some distance between us.

"I can't believe you, Rista. I was only joking around..."

Yeah right! She was going to have her way with me if I hadn't made her hair fall out!

“Anyway, you surprised me, Rista. Since when did you become the Goddess of Hair Removal?”

“I’m not! Ugh, Mitis, please just shut up!”

After leaving the Divine Forest, utterly exhausted, I return to the café, where Aria tells me that Seiya is training with Adenela in the Summoning Chamber.

...I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions. I heard he was going to do some berserker training, so I thought he was going to be training with Zet, but he was actually just trying to refine his swordsmanship while in Berserk Mode with Adenela.

Sigh. What a waste of time that was.

Dropping my shoulders, I open the door to the Summoning Chamber.

“Hmm...? Rista, get out. I’m in the middle of training.”

Seiya, whose eyes and hair are red due to his berserker status, stops sparring with Adenela to glare at me, but I’m so tired, I don’t even care.

“So you were training here just like you always do...”

“Hmph. I’m going to overpower and defeat Celemonic before she can cast a single curse.”

Seiya then gets back into a fighting stance with his sword, and without his even having to say anything, Adenela gets ready for combat as well.

“Berserk: Phase 2.7...!”

And with those words, the exhaustion dragging me down instantly melts away.

Phase 2.7?! He was able to reach only 2.6 when he was fighting Grandleon and Oxerio! Does this mean he was able to slightly increase his max phase?!

But that isn’t the only thing that surprises me. Despite both of Adenela’s arms being Divine Swords, Seiya still breaks through her guard and raises a platinum sword high into the air.

“Atomic Split Slash!”

The Summoning Chamber’s floor explodes with an ear-piercing roar, and the

powerful shock wave blows me away! I somehow manage to sit back up, but the part of the floor that took a direct hit has caved in! The aftershocks even sent fissures across every square inch of the ground.

“What power...! Wait! Seiya?! What happened to Adenela?!”

“I’m holding back. I never planned on hitting her.”

I look in the direction Seiya’s pointing to find Adenela descending from a high leap into the air to dodge the attack.

Oh, thank goodness Adenela’s okay! Anyway, I can’t believe how powerful that was! I mean, Atomic Split Slash is already a powerful attack, but after he multiplied his attack power through Berserk Mode, it was just...

“H-hold on! I thought you couldn’t use magic or skills while in Berserk Mode! Zet said it wasn’t possible to use both at once!”

“It’s possible once you get the hang of it.”

I—I can’t believe it! Just who is this Hero?! He always does the impossible no matter what people tell him!

As I stare with mute amazement, Seiya casually explains: “It’s like reading a book while eating. It isn’t polite, but it’s not like you can’t do it.”

So that’s what it’s like...! Then maybe I can do it, too? ...A-actually, on second thought, I probably shouldn’t take a genius’s word when it comes to what’s easy and what’s not.

“Hee-hee-hee-hee-hee! Th-that was perfect. You’ve g-gotten even stronger, Seiya.”

And I’m not the only one with great respect for the genius Hero. Adenela’s smile is dripping with satisfaction.

“I-it takes a lot of time and r-requires difficult conditions t-to cast a powerful curse. Ccurses are useless against q-quick fighters l-like us.”

Seiya nods, then sheathes his sword.

“Berserk: Phase 2.7 and being able to use moves during Berserk Mode should be more than enough to defeat Celemonic.”

“Oh, nice! So you’re already perfectly prepared, huh!”

But Seiya sends me a reproachful gaze.

“Rista, I heard you were training to learn how to seal curses.”

“Oh... Yeah, I learned how to do it, but...”

“At any rate, I won’t be needing help.”

“C-come on! I only learned just in case things don’t go as planned! It’s like you always say: You need to be prepared for anything!”

“That’s why I’m training with Adenela. This is for ‘just in case things don’t go as planned.’ I already created a sturdy fortress in the south of Rhadral on the coast, where I plan on stopping the Vengeful Empress Celemonic. However, in the unlikely event that proves difficult, I am going to use Berserk: Phase 2.7 with a skill and swiftly take out the enemy.”

I swallow my breath in the face of his overflowing confidence and piercing gaze.

I-it really does look like he’s not gonna need any of my help! But I spent almost all my money...

Feeling listless, I ask:

“So are we heading back to Ixphoria now?”

But Seiya’s answer isn’t what I expected.

“No, I plan on staying in the spirit world for another day or two.”

“Huh? But I thought you were perfectly prepared.”

“I am perfectly prepared to handle Celemonic. However...”

Seiya glances at me like he wants to say something, then averts his gaze.

“I still have another matter to take care of.”

“‘Another matter’?”

As a man of few words, Seiya turns on his heel and leaves the Summoning Chamber.

I wonder what it could be. Does it have something to do with why Ishtar

wanted to talk to him...and maybe something to do with what Aria said?

I feel like staying in the spirit world even after being completely prepared for the enemy isn't something Seiya usually does, but I expected to be here for a few days anyway. We end up staying a little longer after that.

The Land of the Lifeless

It's our third day back in the spirit world. After waking up, I head over to Café du Cerceus to see Kiriko. Past the table with the umbrella where I usually chat with Aria is a small building with a kitchen where Jonde and Kiriko are resting.

"Hey, Kiri? I'm coming in."

I walk into the room that was given to Kiriko and find her in the corner of the small living space under the sheets.

"Oh, sorry! Were you sleeping? I...I didn't even know you slept."

Kiriko bashfully scratches her head.

"I'm actually not sleepy at all, but Cerceus told me I had to sleep after working so hard, so..."

Uh... Why is Cerceus putting a robot to bed? I always had a feeling, but Cerceus is so dumb!

"I'm sorry, Kiri. I'll tell that doofus that you don't need to sleep."

But Kiriko shakes her head.

"It's fine! I am really grateful for everything Cerceus has done for me! It makes me so happy to be treated like a human!"

"R-really?"

Well, if she's happy, I'm happy.

"Then come over here for a second."

I sit Kiriko before the dresser in her room.

"You *are* a girl, right? I have something that would look so cute on you."

I stick a flower pendant that I brought with me onto Kiriko's chest.

“Wh-what’s this?”

“It’s one of the flowers you took care of in Termine! I put one in my pouch and preserved it before it wilted. It’s a present!”

Kiriko is overcome with surprise for a few moments before she takes my hand and shakes it up and down.

“Thank you so much, Rista! I’ll cherish it forever!”

I just knew Kiriko would love it. The peach-colored flower on her chest makes her look slightly less threatening despite her Killing Machine body. I contentedly watch Kiriko in the mirror, but she appears to be gazing at me.

“You’re so pretty, Rista!”

“Whaaat? No, I’m not.”

I act modest, but I’m secretly overjoyed. Seiya usually insults me so much that I’ve become sensitive to compliments. I take a look at myself in the mirror.

Yeah... I am pretty, aren’t I? After all, I am a goddess...so why can’t Seiya see how attractive I am?!

I’m pretty... Pretty... Giggle... I am pretty, aren’t I?

My narcissism slowly pokes its head out while I’m in a trance...until I suddenly realize that my lips are drooping in the mirror.

“Huh...?”

And for some reason, I can clearly see pronounced smile lines as well!

“Uh...?”

Countless tiny wrinkles begin appearing on my head and at the corners of my eyes! My once-beautiful blond hair gradually turns white!

“Wh-wh-wh-what’s going on?!”

“R-Rista?! Y-you suddenly turned into an old woman!”

In the midst of our panic, I hear a calm voice next to me.

“Hmm... You aged extremely quickly. What power.”

“What the...?! ”

When I look to my side, Seiya is pointing the red blade of his sword at me! And a sinister reddish-black aura is radiating from the sword and wrapping itself around me!

“So this was your doing?! Seiyaaaaaa!”

“It’s the sword’s power. I made it by synthesizing one of the Dark God’s Amulets I bought from that beastkin with a sword that absorbs life force.”

When Seiya pulls the sword away from me, the wrinkles disappear, but when he brings it toward me, I turn back into a wrinkly old lady.

“Can you stop making me age back and forth already?!”

“It’s a mysterious sword. I should probably appraise it.”

I twitch my nose while using Appraise along with Seiya.

“The Holy Power Draining Sword... It can absorb divine energy from deities! This sword will age and weaken deities just by being near them!”

I faintly tremble as I scream:

“What the...?! That sword is completely useless!”

“‘The Holy Power Draining Sword’... That’s a mouthful. From now on I’m calling it the ‘Granny Rista Sword.’”

“Seiya?! What the hell?! Enough joking around, damn it!”

“I’m not joking around. I’m developing a sword to replace the platinum sword, since I’m sure any weapon powerful enough to defeat the Demon Lord no longer exists in Ixphoria.”

“There’s no way you’re gonna beat the Demon Lord with that garbage!”

“It’s too early to say it’s garbage. It could come in handy one day. If possible, I want to make a spare as well.”

“You’d be wasting your time!”

I glare at Seiya disdainfully as he tucks the ominous sword away in his item bag.

“Wait. Was this why you wanted to stay in the spirit world longer?! To make

that thing?!”

“No. This was for a separate matter.”

What does that even mean?! How many separate matters are there?!

“I still haven’t made any progress with the issue I mentioned before. Nevertheless, staying in the spirit world any longer isn’t going to solve anything, so we will be returning to Ixphoria today. Make sure you’re ready.”

That’s all Seiya says before leaving the room.

“What is wrong with him?!”

First he turns me into an old woman. Then he tells me to hurry up and prepare! I seethe with rage, but Kiriko cheerfully snickers: “Seiya must really love you, Rista!”

“Wh-what?!”

“Seeing you two get along so well makes me really happy, too!”

What part of that made it look like we get along?! Hmm... I guess Kiri is a robot, after all. She doesn’t understand relationships between men and women at all.

After pulling myself together, I tell Jonde and Cerceus we’re going back to Ixphoria, and Cerceus looks a little sad when he hears the news.

“You’re welcome here anytime you’re back in the spirit world.”

“Thank you. I really appreciate what you’ve done for us.”

Cerceus firmly shakes Jonde’s hand, then turns around to Kiriko.

“I want to thank you as well, Kiriko. Business was great thanks to you.”

“Wh-what?! I didn’t do anything special...!”

Café du Cerceus has been slightly busy these past two days since word got out that there was a café in the spirit world where monsters serve you. Cerceus stares at them while wearing a serious expression for a change.

“My biases clouded my judgment, but I was able to change my way of thinking thanks to you two. Even as the Divine Blade, I had always been—

Gwaaaaaah!”

Out of nowhere, Cerceus is blown a few dozen meters away, where he is ungracefully flipped over and foams at the mouth.

“C-Cerceus?!”

“Ahhh! Cerceus!!”

Jonde and Kiriko scream his name. Standing where Cerceus once was is Seiya, his leg retracting after the kick he delivered. Jonde points at the unconscious café owner and screams: “What did you kick him for?!”

“I was getting the feeling that his ridiculous speech was going to drag on, so I sped things up.”

“You kicked him that hard because of an assumption you had?! How horrible!”

Seiya ignores Jonde and says to me: “It looks like you’re ready. Let’s go.”

“O-okay...”

I keep my mouth shut in fear of being kicked as well and open a gate. But before we walk through, Aria and Adenela come to see us off.

“Seiya, Rista, I know you can do it.”

“Thanks, Aria!”

After expressing my gratitude, I hand the divine items I bought from Baldr over to Aria.

“Th-there’s nothing to w-worry about anymore. S-Seiya has become extraordinarily strong. Th-there is probably no one left in th-the human realms who can defeat him.”

I nod back at Adenela with a smile before turning to face Seiya.

“All right, Seiya, shall we head back to Termine?”

“No, I want to do some work on the fortress I created on the southern coast of Rhadral.”

“Near Galvano, right? You got it.”

But as we're about to leave, Jonde looks at Seiya apologetically and asks: "I'm sorry if this is too much of an imposition, but would it be possible to go to the northern lands of Baraque now that the machine corps is gone?"

"Why?"

"Although the machine corps ruled the continent, there may still be survivors like with Termine."

"Hmm..."

Seiya falls silent for a few moments and considers, but...

"Seiya! If possible, I want to see what's going on in Baraque, too!"

With that, the warrior nods decisively. It looks like Kiriko got through to him. While he may be coldhearted sometimes, he's still a Hero. If there are lives to be saved, he'll be there. Of course, I feel the same way. Be that as it may, I need Ishtar's permission if I'm going to open a gate to a place I've never been before.

"Rista, I'll ask Great Goddess Ishtar for permission."

After overhearing our conversation, Aria closes her eyes and begins conversing with Ishtar. A few moments go by, and she opens her eyes.

"You have been granted permission to open a gate to the continent of Baraque, but..."

Aria wears a solemn expression and continues:

"Great Goddess Ishtar seems confident that there are no survivors..."

I gasp, but Seiya isn't convinced.

"But Ishtar's clairvoyance was weakened because of the demon, right? We won't know if there aren't any survivors until we see for ourselves."

"Y-yeah, Seiya's right! Let's go!"

Jonde and Kiriko agree as well, so we end up setting out for Baraque after Seiya sends an earth serpent through the gate to make sure it's safe.

Jonde, Kiriko, and I are speechless the instant we cross the gate. Well over a hundred skeletons are littered throughout the burned fields that extend as far as the eye can see.

H-how cruel...! I guess there really aren't any survivors...

But in contrast to our astonishment, Seiya speaks up with his usual indifferent tone.

“Well, while there are unlikely to be any survivors, let’s start searching. It’s possible that this area is the only one in ruins.”

Seiya then gets on one knee and places a hand on the ground. It looks like he’s creating some scout earth serpents, prompting a question from Jonde.

“Won’t it take a long time to scout the entire continent? While not as expansive as Rhadril, Baraque is relatively large.”

But at the very next moment, the ground around Seiya swells. As if a pebble was dropped into water, the ripple spreads out at an incredible speed in all directions, moving away from Seiya.

“While training under the God of Earth, I was able to learn how to create earth serpents that can move exponentially faster than before. It shouldn’t take much time to scout the whole of the continent.”

Seiya closes his eyes. It appears he has linked his eyes to the countless earth serpents, and he gives brief reports from time to time like a machine.

“West side, all deceased within a fifty-kilometer radius.

“Same in the north. No survivors.”

Right now, Seiya must be witnessing horrific images that the rest of us can’t see.

“Hey, Seiya...are you doing okay? You must be suffering right now...”

“I’m fine. While it takes a lot of concentration to share sight with so many earth serpents, it isn’t really a problem.”

“O-oh... You don’t say...”

It looks like he’s not shaken up even after seeing so many dead bodies. It’s gotten to the point that the things he and I worry about are on two completely different planes. More importantly, I suddenly notice Kiriko lowering her head behind Seiya, but before I can say anything, Jonde places a hand on her

shoulder.

“Are you okay, Kiriko?”

“Fathe—Oxerio said my real parents were dead as well. Does that mean that their bodies are somewhere here, too?”

Her question clearly takes him by surprise.

“N-not necessarily! I’m sure there are still survivors somewhere! I’m certain your parents are okay!”

“I hope so, but...”

I approach Kiriko as she stares at the ground, then bend my knees until we’re eye to eye.

“Hey, Kiri? You’re a really good girl, and good things happen to good people.”

“Really...?”

“Yes, really.”

Jonde chimes in as well.

“She’s right! We might even find a way to turn you human again one day!”

“M-me...? A human...?”

“It could definitely happen!”

“R-really? Th-that would make me...so happy...”

A cheerful note brightens Kiriko’s voice.

“Thank you so much! I feel so much better now!”

But out of nowhere, Seiya interjects coldly with his back to us: “Some people live good lives only to die with nothing. There are even those who do evil yet live comfortably without ever being judged. You never know what’s going to happen.”

Not missing a beat, Jonde heatedly objects.

“What is wrong with you?!”

Yeah! I can’t believe Seiya would do that, especially after how hard we

worked to cheer her up!

Seiya turns his head and glares at Kiriko distantly.

“Kiriko, you’re a machine. Maybe you’ll be able to become a human again one day, but don’t get your hopes up.”

I can’t sit back and listen any longer.

“Seiya! I can’t believe you! Why would you say that?!”

“The disappointment would crush her if it ended up being impossible, and it would be your fault for getting her hopes up.”

“B-but...”

“Don’t give people false hope.”

Seiya stands with his back still turned to us.

“Rista, open a gate. We’re done here.”

“What?! D-does that mean...?!”

“I’ve finished scouting the entire continent of Baraque. Ishtar was right. There are no survivors. There are still remnants of the machine corps scattered throughout the continent, though.”

“H-hold on! You’re being rash! There is no way of knowing that in such a short time! You may have missed something!”

“I didn’t miss anything. My investigation was thorough and perfect. There isn’t a single survivor.”

Jonde has been around Seiya long enough to know that what he’s saying is true. As a heavy silence reigns over us, Kiriko mutters: “I knew my father and mother were dead...”

“It’s no surprise, though. We knew this coming in. This was done only to make sure and as a formality. Besides, even if your parents were alive, you don’t even know what they look like, right?”

“Yeah...you’re right...”

Seiya then shifts his gaze from Kiriko to me.

“Well, that was a waste of time. Rista, we’re heading to the fortress as originally planned.”

“S-Seiya! Have some empathy! Think about how Kiri must feel right now!”

“I-it’s fine, Rista! Let’s go to the fortress. B-besides...I don’t want to be here anymore...”

“Kiri...”

Jonde bitterly kicks up some dirt. He doesn’t come out and say it, but he’s probably regretting asking to come here to search for survivors.

Beaten down and disheartened, we set out for the southern coast of Rhadral.

Walking Calamity

Queen Carmilla gently places a tan cloak over Kiriko.

“I wish I could give you something a little cuter than brown, but that would make you stick out like a sore thumb.”

“Oh! No, it’s fine! This cloak is wonderful! Thank you so much!”

Jonde, Kiriko, and I are currently in the queen’s chamber in Termine’s royal palace. Two days have passed since we went to Baraque, and Kiriko is back to her usual cheerful self, thanks to Queen Carmilla’s help. Despite the soldiers’ concern, the queen allowed Kiriko into her chamber and played with her. Incidentally, the rumors spread like wildfire, and the people of Termine gradually separated themselves from the idea that Kiriko was a frightening monster.

As Kiriko gleefully checks out her new cloak in the full-length mirror, Jonde explains to her: “Kiriko, it is a great honor to receive a gift from the queen!”

“It really is! Everyone is so nice to me! I can’t begin to describe how happy I am!”

As the queen’s eyes narrow in delight, she says to me: “She’s a wonderful girl.”

“Yes, she really is!”

“It’s as if... No...”

The queen quietly shakes her head as she smiles. Perhaps she’s reminiscing about Princess Tiana as a child.

...I wonder if she would believe me if I told her I am the reincarnation of Princess Tiana. I want to believe she would, seeing as how she accepted Kiriko, but...

“Did the Hero go back to Galvano?”

“O-oh! Y-yes, he did!”

I reply shrilly, taken aback by the abrupt question.

“He never takes a day off. Is he going to be all right?”

“He’ll be fine! This is Seiya we’re talking about!”

The queen may be worried, but I’m not, for I understand that preparation without rest is how the Hero normally operates.

Hiss! Hiss! Ssssss!

“Oh, speak of the devil. It’s an earth-serpent phone call.”

I reach for the earth serpent in my dress and place it to my ear.

“Rista, I need to return to Termine. Open a gate.”

“Okay.”

Almost immediately after I open a gate, Seiya comes walking out of it.

“So how’s the fortress?”

“I finally completed it today.”

Jonde and I were left speechless when we saw the fortress to the south of Galvano the other day. There were stone walls built around the vast lands, with numerous golems stationed there as well. In between the walls stood a robust stronghold so breathtaking that it was hard to believe one person could have created it. We went back to Termine as Seiya continued reinforcing the walls, but I thought the fortress was already completed then. By “completed,” he probably means he put 120 percent into perfecting it.

When Seiya takes notice of the queen, he briskly walks over to her.

“Can I borrow this undead when the Vengeful Empress Celemonic attacks?”

I’m so surprised that I almost jump when I see Seiya point at Jonde.

“What?! You’re willingly bringing someone with you?! You?!”

“Oh? So you need my help? Well, I’d be glad to, but the final decision rests with the queen.”

Ignoring Jonde and his enthusiasm, Seiya explains to the queen and me: “He’s undead, which means he’s basically already cursed, so we don’t have to worry much about him being cursed again. Even if by some chance he does get cursed or is killed in battle, it doesn’t matter, since he’s just a zombie.”

After hearing the truth, Jonde’s voice becomes strained.

“I cannot believe you! I am right here, you know!”

“Yeah, Seiya! You should have at least said that when Jonde wasn’t around!”

“What?! No! I do not want you talking behind my back, either! You two are the worst! My queen, please say something!”

“I don’t care what happens to the dead. Do whatever you want with him.”

“What?! My queen?! How can you be so cruel?”

Seiya might be serious, but the queen’s mischievous smile is proof that she’s only joking. Kiriko and I giggle.

The Vengeful Empress Celemonic... I wonder if she’ll be bringing an army of curse-type monsters as well. I can feel the hairs on the back of my neck stand up just thinking about it.

Jonde, on the other hand, calls over one of his subordinates guarding the door.

“Fetch my armor from my room.”

“Yes, sir!”

The soldier gives a spirited salute before heading off toward Jonde’s room... when Seiya stops him.

“Forget the armor and make some tea. I might need to pour it on him if his zombie stench gets any worse.”

“Yes, sir!”

“...?! Don’t ‘yes, sir’ him! Who do you think you work for?! The armor is clearly much more important than the tea!”

While Jonde sternly lectures his subordinate, I suddenly notice Seiya staring at Kiriko.

“Hey. What’s that?”

“Huh? That’s Kiri.”

She’s wearing the cloak that the queen gave her, so she kind of looks like someone wearing armor under a cloak from afar. That’s probably why Seiya was confused.

...However, that isn’t what Seiya meant.

“Why didn’t you just have me use Transform and turn her into a human?”

Oh yeah! We should have just had Seiya transform her into a little girl! How did I not think of that?!

I lose heart after realizing the flower pendant I gave her and the cloak from the queen were meaningless...but it turns out Kiriko is against the idea.

“Um... I want to stay the way I am now if that’s okay...because this is who I am now...”

A few moments of silence go by until Seiya utters:

“Whatever.”

“I-I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“If that’s what you want, then that’s all that matters.”

The atmosphere becomes slightly heavy until Seiya seems to faintly shudder.

“Um...? Seiya...?”

And it’s not just me who notices the change but Kiriko as well.

“S-Seiya, are you okay?! Are you feeling dizzy?!”

But all of a sudden...

Hiss! Hiss! Ssssss!

The earth-serpent phone under his armor begins beeping! It’s the same alarm that went off when the machine corps was attacking Termine!

The earth serpent shakes as Seiya pulls it out of his armor. It looks as if he can set them to vibrate as well. I guess the earth serpent just made it look like Seiya shuddered.

“Seiya! Is something happening in Termine?”

“No. It’s from an earth serpent keeping watch on the south coast of Rhadral.”

“Th-then does that mean that Celemonic’s army has crossed the ocean?!”

“It’s possible. Hold on.”

Seiya closes his eyes. It looks like he’s linking his vision with the earth serpent’s. After a few moments pass, he says: “There’s what appears to be a small boat approaching the coast. I can see someone on it.”

“I-is it Celemonic?”

“I don’t know.”

The queen curiously tilts her head.

“Would a powerful monster who rules an entire continent really paddle her way over here on such a small boat? Surely she’d bring an army of monsters with her if she planned on attacking.”

“I felt the same, which is why I built a strong fortress. But we shouldn’t assume that’s not Celemonic.”

“Hero, what were they wearing?”

“I don’t know.”

“Why are you being so vague? Is the enemy still too far away to see clearly?”

Seiya knits his eyebrows.

“I’m avoiding looking directly. Wouldn’t want to risk being cursed and turned into stone.”

“S-Seiya, even if that is Celemonic, I doubt you’d be cursed just by looking at her.”

I say it with a smile, but Seiya is completely serious.

“There’s a videotape you could rent in my world that put a curse on anyone who viewed it. We should consider the possibility of being cursed through visual contact.”

Yeaah—no... That’s definitely not real. Besides, there’s no way they’d be

renting cursed videotapes at a rental shop...but instead of pointing out the obvious, I keep my mouth shut and nod.

“At any rate, I’m going to the fortress to safely analyze the enemy. Rista, open a gate.”

While I don’t think it’s Celemonic, it’s still suspicious. After opening a gate, I turn my gaze on Kiriko.

“What are you going to do, Kiri? You can stay here if you want.”

“I-I’m part of the team! I’m coming with you!”

Kiriko then clasps her hands together before her chest. I nod, and the queen smiles at her.

“You don’t have to worry about Termine. There are plenty of golems here, and a giant goddess is outside the walls keeping watch.”

“Thank you for letting me come with you!”

“Granted, the only good thing about that piece of junk is that it’s big.”

“Hey!! Stop calling her a piece of junk!!”

Seiya slowly opens the gate leading into the fortress. Jonde, Kiriko, and I go in after him. We are following Seiya through the dungeon-like stone-walled path when...

“Hey, it’s a dead end.”

Jonde complains, standing before the stone wall in front of us. That’s when the ground under our feet begins to rock.

“Wh-what?!”

I suddenly feel like I’m floating, and my body begins bobbing up and down. After a few moments go by, I come to an abrupt stop.

“Seiya! What was that?”

“It’s like an elevator. We’re underneath the fortress now.”

“Wait. What?!”

Even I can see how strong Seiya’s fortress is. He seems to have put a lot of

work into its defense, and yet, he made a shelter underground as well? I thought I was used to how overly cautious he is, but here I am...

Despite our mute amazement, Seiya walks down the underground path until he reaches a wooden door. I follow him inside, where I am taken by surprise yet again. Glowstones illuminate the spacious room, and countless water-filled buckets are lined up on the floor. The buckets display various places nearby, such as the sea, the flatlands, and the area around the fortress. In addition, Seiya has created what appears to be an observation deck out of stone. Numerous earth serpents stick out of it like microphones. It's like the observation room in the watchtower evolved into a control room.

"Hmm..."

With knitted brow, Seiya stares fixedly at one of the buckets. But when I look at the monitor as well, I gasp.

"Th-the boat's...empty..."

An empty boat lies on the coast.

Whoever was on that boat...has already landed in Rhadral!

"Strange... While I wasn't directly looking, I made sure the earth serpent kept a constant eye on the boat."

"S-Seiya! Where did they go?"

"Relax. I have countless earth serpents positioned around the fortress. I'll find them in no time."

Seiya then glances at Jonde.

"Jonde, you're up."

"R-ready when you are!"

Jonde stands with his sword, but Seiya stops him.

"What are you doing?"

"Huh?! I thought we were departing for battle?!"

"No, your job is to keep tabs on the enemy on the earth-serpent monitors."

“That’s it?!”

“In addition to cursed footage, just listening to the enemy’s voice might put a curse on you as well. So you’re going to check, since you’re undead.”

“So I’m basically a food taster checking for poison?!”

“Yes. Now look into the bucket. I’ll make the earth-serpent camera approach the enemy.”

Jonde trepidatiously peers into the bucket. Then he slowly begins stringing his words together.

“She’s heading toward the fortress... She looks like a human female...but... with...two heads.”

Jonde’s annoyed tone gradually grows serious.

“I have never seen a monster like that before. That must be Celemonic.”

“How would you know? You can’t even use Scan, right? I did a lot of digging, but there isn’t much information on Celemonic. Her appearance alone isn’t enough to go by.”

“No, that is Celemonic. I have never seen a monster as menacing as that. The grass around her dies with every step she takes.”

While Seiya always makes fun of him, Jonde is still a seasoned general. He knows what he’s talking about.

“...What’s she doing?”

“She’s mumbling something, but it’s unintelligible.”

After a few moments go by, Seiya firmly nods.

“All right. It looks like you can’t be cursed just by looking at her or listening to her voice. Jonde, you can go back to Termine now.”

“...?! Don’t be absurd! I am not going back!”

Seiya pushes Jonde out of the way and peers into the bucket while Kiriko and I timidly take a peek as well from behind. I see a woman walking as her long, ragged dress drags across the ground. There is close-up footage of the enemy being displayed in the neighboring bucket, too. There’s a woman with long,

tousled black hair...and right next to her head is another—this one with beautiful black hair that's been tied back! The monster has two heads, just like Jonde said!

The tousle-haired woman screams:

"That was your fault, Monica!"

The woman with tied-back hair calmly replies:

"No, Celena, that was you. All I did was gouge out Shanak's eyes."

"Bullshit! All I did was break her nose!"

Wh-what an eerie thing to be arguing about...!

"Celena, the Hero is who we should be concerned about right now, not the dead. I heard that Grandleon and Oxerio were defeated. We must be on our guard."

"I don't give a shit. I bet the Hero's gonna be surprised, since we came alone, though."

"Those truly strong move in small numbers, after all. But Celena, the Hero isn't 'going to be surprised' because..."

The head's eyes suddenly open wide, and our eyes meet through the monitor!

"The Hero is already listening to our conversation."

I shake Seiya while trembling.

"S-S-Seiya! They know we're watching!"

"Yeah. I'm going to move the earth serpent. While it looks close up, there are actually over thirty meters between this earth-serpent camera and them."

"I-it's that far away?! That's a really good camera!"

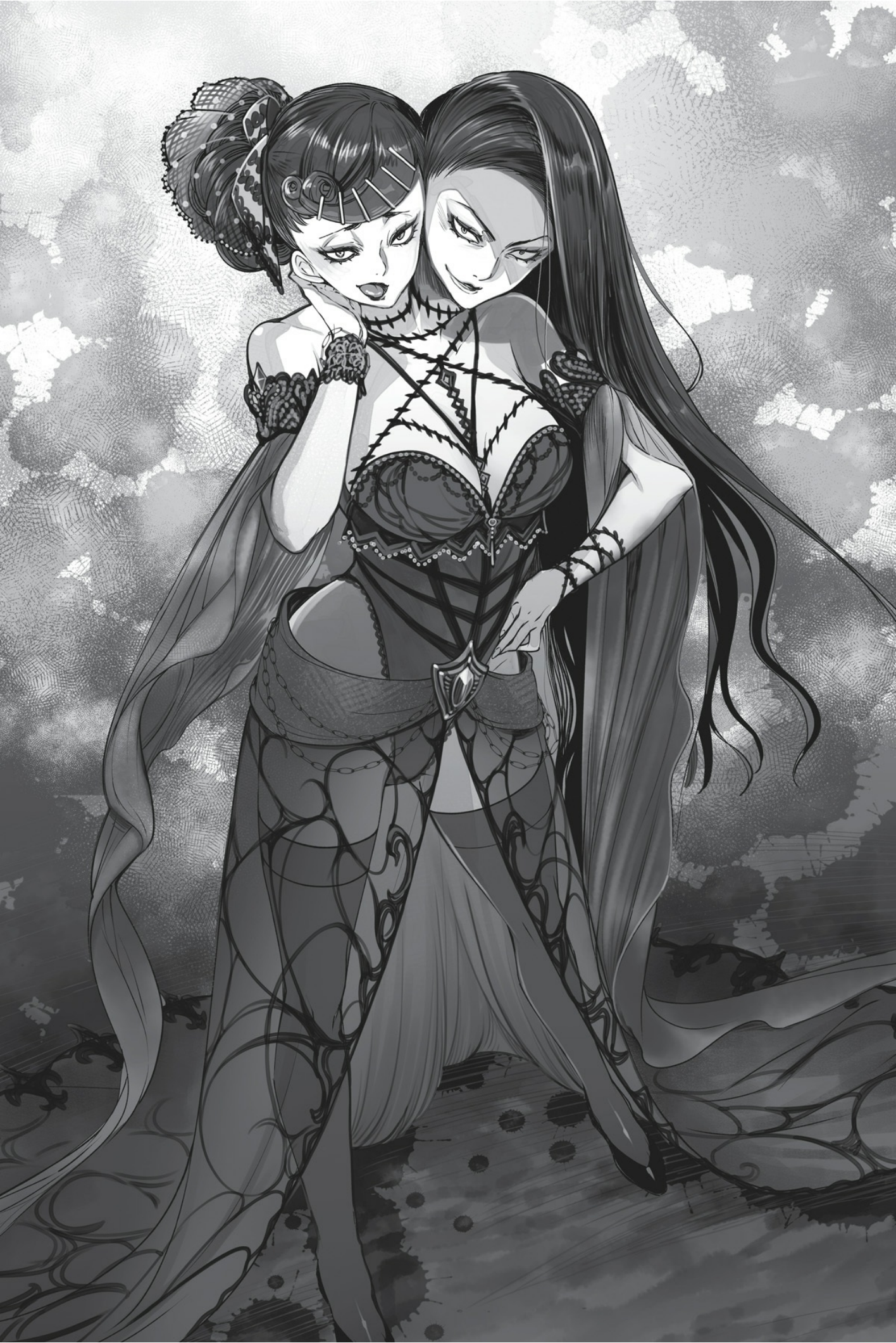
But as he's about to give orders to the earth serpent, Seiya suddenly stops.

"Hmm. They're fast."

"What's d—?"

Before I can even finish my sentence, a giant lifeless eye appears on the

earth-serpent monitor!



“Eek!”

“Ahhh!”

Kiriko and I fall back onto our rears in shock. The enemy must have moved slightly away from the camera because both heads are now being projected on the monitor. The woman with neat hair and the woman with unkempt hair begin speaking in turn.

“How do you do, Hero? I am the Vengeful Empress Celemonic.”

“Blech! Stop being so polite, Monica! It’s disgusting! It’s me! I am the Vengeful Empress Celemonic!”

The two heads cackle.

“More importantly, I have come to avenge my sister Shanak.”

“I hope ya like being cursed, because you’re gonna writhe in pain until you die!”

Careful Instructions

The monitor we're watching suddenly cuts to static. Celemonic must have destroyed the earth serpent that acted as the camera. Regardless, Seiya sent out countless earth serpents. The adjoining bucket is already displaying the enemy leisurely walking from a different angle.

Kiriko grabs the hem of my dress and asks in a voice dripping with anxiety: "Th-they said they were going to avenge their sister, right? What are they talking about?"

"Maybe one of the monsters we defeated after arriving in Ixphoria was their sister..."

But Seiya hasn't really defeated anything aside from beastkin and Killing Machines. Wait... Could Seiya have killed their sister during his past life in Ixphoria, when he used to be reckless?!

Kiriko and I rack our brains over what Celemonic meant, but Seiya seems to be thinking about something completely different. He glares at me with eyes full of disappointment.

"That doesn't matter right now. Rista, can you check their status?"

"Huh? Their status?"

I use Scan while looking at the enemy through the monitor, but nothing happens.

"I-it's not working! I can't see anything!"

"Figured. I tried, too, but couldn't see anything. There are many things that could have caused it, though. We could be too far from the enemy, or maybe Scan doesn't work through monitors. It's even possible that they're using Fake Out or have a cursed aura preventing Scan from working."

Whatever the cause, it's spooky not knowing the enemy's status. To make matters worse, Celemonic's appearance doesn't make them any less frightening. Kiriko tightens her grip on my dress as she watches the two-headed monster cackle while walking.

In an attempt to cheer myself up, I tell her:

"B-but Celemonic is alone! And we have Seiya along with tons of golems around the fortress as well! Right, Seiya?"

"Yeah. I placed about two thousand outside."

The monitor Seiya is pointing at displays the front of the fortress in a wide angle, allowing us to see the valiant figures of the golems lined up around the fortress. Kiriko and I heave a sigh of relief. However, Celemonic continues recklessly advancing toward the impregnable fortress, guarded by golems, alone. The head with unkempt hair wears a look of disgust.

"The hell kind of person would prepare this many golems? Just how much of a coward is this Hero?"

"You could consider it an honor, depending on how you think about it. This is simply proof of how much of a threat Empress Celemonic truly is. Unfortunately...there is no reason to even fight them."

"Yeah, doesn't matter how many of them there are."

The two heads then simultaneously chant:

""Stealth Step.""

I blink, and suddenly, they're nowhere to be seen! No matter how many times I check the screen, all I can see are golems and the fortress!

"...Over there."

Seiya points with his chin to a bucket a bit farther from us. On the monitor is a bird's-eye view of the fortress's entrance and Celemonic already standing in front of it.

Jonde and I can't believe our eyes.

"N-no way! When did she get all the way over there?!"

“Impossible! How did the monster get through the golems’ defense?!”

The woman with unkempt hair notices the earth-serpent camera above the entrance, so she stares right into it and hisses: “Hya-ha-ha! Did you see that? I’m gonna teleport over there and slit your puny throats!”

“Oh, Celena. Why did you have to reveal the secret of our ability?”

“Oops! My bad!”

“It doesn’t matter. There is no way to prevent it, after all.”

The hairs on my neck stand up as I listen to the Celemonic sisters’ conversation.

“What...? D-does that mean they can suddenly teleport right over here?!”

I thought this sturdy fortress was safe, yet I feel like I was suddenly stabbed in the back with a cold knife.

Jonde unsheathes his sword while Kiriko and I look around in terror. Only Seiya remains calm.

“Relax. They might be able to teleport, but they can’t teleport wherever they want. If they could, they would have teleported right next to Rista and me while we were in Termine. Plus, they wouldn’t need to cross the ocean on a boat. Their teleportation ability has limits.”

“Limits?”

“I can infer a few. They can only teleport across adjoining land...or only to places they can see. At any rate, my strategy will change based on whether they’re really teleporting or if they’re merely moving close to the speed of light.”

Seiya crosses his arms.

“Hmph. Whatever the case, it’s nothing I didn’t expect. It won’t be a problem.”

Jonde, Kiriko, and I exchange glances for a few moments until Jonde curls his lips, lets out a chuckle, and sheathes his sword. The tense atmosphere slowly fades.

Celemonic's eerie appearance and behavior, along with the power to teleport, would usually be something to panic about, but as always, Seiya doesn't even flinch. The Vengeful Empress Celemonic is a mystery, but in a sense, so is the Hero.

"Now I have you right where I want you. Like a moth flying into the flame."

It's calming to hear Seiya spit out lines you'd usually hear from the villain.

Yeah! Seiya can beat anyone! Even if they somehow manage to make it down here, Seiya can use Berserk: Phase 2.7 and tear them apart! There's nothing to be afraid of!

But that's when it happens...

BAM!!

I hear a sudden, earsplitting crash. When I look in the direction of the clamor, Seiya's face is shoved into the earth-serpent-monitor bucket.

"...Huh?"

I'm in shock. Seiya doesn't even move as his face remains snugly in the bucket. It's like a ridiculous scene out of a comedy.

"H-hey... This is no time to be joking around."

"Yeah, what are you doing, Seiya?"

Jonde and I have no idea what's going on. Kiriko, on the other hand, rushes over to him and shakes his body.

"Seiya! Seiya...! Are you okay?!"

"Oh, Kiri. Don't worry. There's no way Seiya's in any danger."

Kiriko picks Seiya up, but his eyes remain closed and his body limp. As Seiya lies on the ground, Kiriko places a hand on his chest and face.

"He's still breathing! He has a heartbeat, too! But he's unconscious!"

I send Kiriko a smile as she panics.

"Don't worry! It's gonna be fine! He's just acting again, like he did with Ozerio!"

“I have no idea what the Hero is trying to do, but...that’s enough. Hero, get up,” says Kiriko.

But Seiya’s eyes stay closed. Kiriko then tugs at my dress.

“Rista!! Check Seiya’s status!”

I use Scan as she urges me to hurry.



SEIYA RYUUGUIN

Job: Spellblade (Earth)

LV: 99 (MAX)

HP: 321,960 MP:
88,155

ATK:	DEF:	SPD:	MAG:	GRW:
293,412	287,644	268,875	58,751	999 (MAX)
				...

“See? What’d I tell you? He still has max HP.”

A shiver suddenly jolts down my spine.

*W-wait! Why can I see Seiya’s status when it’s usually hidden with Fake Out?!
D-does that mean he’s really...?!*

“No...! Seiya?!”

I rush over to Seiya and hold him in my arms after finally realizing the gravity of the situation.

“Why?! What’s wrong?! This has never happened before!”

Standing by my side, Jonde slowly turns pale.

“I-is this the curse of Celemonic?! Was the Hero right?! Was he cursed just by looking at the monster?!”

“What?! But then why would we be fine?!”

In the midst of our panicking and screaming...

“It’s probably not a curse.”

Kiriko's calm voice stands out. After I let out a deep breath, I ask: "Th-then why do you think Seiya fainted?"

"Because his heart aches."

"H-he's in pain...? *Seiya?*"

"Yes..."

Kiriko gently rubs Seiya's glossy black hair.

"He has been keeping his emotions bottled up inside this entire time. Even after returning to the spirit world or when he saw all those bodies in Baraque... he looked like he was in such pain. Actually, it goes back even before that. Seiya was already in pain ever since I met him..."

"Kiri...?!"

How can a robot possibly know that?

But the very next moment, I hear an ominous voice coming from the bucket.

""Grudge Hand!""

Their voices harmonize as Celemonic holds their right fist up to a golem on the other side of the monitor. Their fist only grazes it, but it immediately crumbles into dust. Three golems then try to rush them from different directions, but they all turn into dust as well from the touch of their hand. Celemonic cackles after having annihilated every last golem guarding the fortress's entrance.

"Booring! Humans are way more fun, since their limbs pop off and blood sprays everywhere."

"Don't worry, Celena. It won't be long before we get to watch the Hero and his friends wail in agony as they die."

Ack! How much scarier can they be?! We don't stand a chance without Seiya!

"I'm gonna open a gate! We're taking Seiya and retreating to the spirit world for now! Jonde, carry Seiya!"

"You got it!"

I create a gate to the spirit world, open the door as quickly as I can...and stand

aghast at the sight. A white wall seals off the portal.

“Th-this is... It’s the power of the spell stone!”

No...! Is there a spell stone in Celemonic’s body just like with Grandleon?! If so, that means...we can’t return to the spirit world when they are nearby!!

“Goddess! If we cannot return to the spirit world, then how about returning to Termine for now? The Hero might recover if we allow him some time to rest! I hate to admit it, but we will not stand a chance without him!”

“Y-you’re right.”

I create a gate to Termine. While we weren’t able to return to the spirit world during the fight against Grandleon, we were able to travel within the continent. But when I open the door to the gate...I shudder, for right before my eyes stands another white wall!

“Mmmm...! We’re trapped!”

Jonde bitterly mutters by my side. He promptly faces Seiya once more and shakes him by the shoulders.

“Hey! Get up! Wake up!!”

“J-Jonde, please wait! Seiya needs to rest!”

“We don’t have time for that!”

Jonde points at a bucket with live footage of Celemonic tilting their heads while standing somewhere extremely fresh in our minds.

“Monica, it looks like we’re at a dead end.”

I-isn’t that where we took the elevator to the underground control room?! How did they get there so quickly?!

It’s obvious they’re teleporting. I quietly gaze at the ceiling. Celemonic is probably only a few dozen meters above us! We motionlessly gaze back and forth between the ceiling and the bucket monitor with bated breath until Celemonic eventually walks away. But right as I let out a sigh of relief, I suddenly hear Celemonic’s voice coming from the bucket.

“Celena, I found a staircase that leads underground.”

Celemonic then heads toward the staircase. They must have noticed the earth-serpent cameras installed along the path, because the head with disheveled hair sticks her long tongue out and shouts: “Ready or not, here we come! Hya-ha-haaa! Now, what kind of curse should we use...?”

“How about a curse that makes every drop of blood ooze from their body while they’re still alive?”

“Or we could make them start rotting from their feet up! I bet that’d make ‘em suffer!”

As Celemonic disappears from the monitor, Jonde yells in a panic: “This isn’t good! They found the staircase to the basement! We don’t have much time!”

“Wh-what should we do?!”

I’m sweating like crazy, and my breathing gets heavy. If they find us like this, it’s over! We’re all gonna die!

But we can’t run away, either, so—Ahhhhhh! What are we going to doooooo?!

While I’m freaking out...

Sss!

Something long and thin suddenly leaps out before me!

“Eeeeeeeek! It’s Celemonic!!”

“R-Rista! It’s just one of Seiya’s earth serpents!”

“Huh...? Oh... You’re right...”

“It appears to be holding something in its mouth.”

Jonde’s right. The earth serpent hands me a coarse sheet of paper.

“Huh...?”

The following is written on the paper:

Rista, if you’re reading this, it means that something happened to me during the battle against Celemonic. While I don’t want to even think about it, I cannot deny the possibility that I might be dead.

As Jonde and Kiriko read the letter over my shoulders, Jonde says in a hushed tone: “Wh-what is this? Is this...a will?”

“But Seiya’s still alive...!”

There are people who write wills long before they die. Incidentally, I don’t really care what happens to me after I die... B-but that’s beside the point! What else does the letter say?!

I always pay close attention to my health and take care of myself, but there are some things that are not easy to prevent: sudden illness, natural disaster, and accidents, to name a few. Therefore, I plan on leaving this letter for you just in case such a thing ever happens to me.

Jonde then basically screams into my ear:

“Isn’t this a bad time to be reading letters?! Celemonic is coming down the stairs as we speak!”

“J-Jonde, wait! Look at this!”

Perhaps even right now as you read this, the fortress has been breached and Celemonic is heading down the staircase into the underground control room where you all are. Nevertheless, I want you to read this letter until the end.

“What the...?! That’s exactly what’s happening!!”

“A-anyway, let’s keep reading, Rista!”

Celemonic thinks they are the hunters closing in on their prey, not realizing that they’re the ones being trapped in a corner. Rista, this fortress itself is a giant trap. It would be nearly impossible for anything other than a powerful monster to defeat multiple golems and reach the staircase leading to the underground floor of the fortress. In short, that staircase was made to thoroughly entrap even the most powerful monsters. Celemonic descended the staircase to hell—the entrance to a thirty-floor underground maze created with earth magic.

“Huh...? An underground...thirty-floor maze...?”

Jonde, Kiriko, and I naturally look up at the ceiling.

I totally thought they were already right above us! Does that mean that we’re

actually on the bottom floor of an elaborate underground labyrinth?!

I believe it is highly unlikely that I'm actually dead. I'm probably just temporarily incapacitated for some reason. Whatever the case, if you carefully follow my instructions, then even you will be able to defeat Celemonic.

There's something written at the end of the coarse paper, almost like a signature: Perfectly Prepared

I take my eyes off the paper and look at Seiya's limp body on the floor.

Uh... If being unconscious is part of being perfectly prepared, then I guess?

That's when...

"Rista! Look!"

My eyes dart in the direction Kiriko is pointing and jump up in surprise. All the earth-serpent monitors, which were displaying footage of the area around the fortress, are slowly changing to cameras set up inside the underground maze! In addition, something that looks like a button suddenly emerges from the stone deck in the distance!

"It's changing into a control room for the underground maze...!"

Jonde frowns while crossing his arms.

"I understand that we are on the thirtieth basement floor, so we are not in immediate danger, but how are we supposed to carefully follow his orders when he is unconscious?"

The earth serpent that brought me the coarse paper dives into the ground.
Did it really understand what Jonde was saying?

A few seconds go by until it suddenly comes back with some sort of scroll around its body.

"A-are these the instructions?"

Right as I reach for the scroll, dozens of other snakes wrapped in scrolls emerge from the ground as well.

"Ahhh!!"

I'm so surprised, I fall on my butt, and the snakes bring all the scrolls to one spot. It isn't long before a mountain of them has amassed.

"You have got to be kidding me!! Are these all instructions?!"

Jonde screams when he sees the sheer volume of scrolls, and I feel the same. More importantly, when did Seiya have this much time to write?! I wouldn't be surprised if he passed out due to exhaustion from writing all these!

An earth serpent coldly stares at Seiya before handing me another scroll with the following instructions: If I am dead, turn to page 108. If I am not dead, turn to page 266.

"Wh-what the hell is this?! A choose-your-path adventure book?!"

"Goddess?! What kind of book is that?!"

"They used to be popular in the world Seiya's from! You get choices during the story, and each choice takes you to a different path! They went out of style when visual novels came out, though!"

"Nothing you're saying makes any sense!"

"Hey!! You asked!"

"P-please stop fighting, you two! Let's just follow Seiya's instructions!"

"Well, Seiya's alive, so I guess we need to go to page 266, but...do we really have to randomly search through this entire pile?"

But when I aggravatedly look at the massive pile, an earth serpent hisses and leaps into the mountain of scrolls. After a few moments go by, it emerges with a scroll, which it opens and shows me. The number 266 is written on the bottom of the page.

Oh. If you say the page number, the serpent brings it to you. Well, that's convenient.

I read the scroll.

Don't be naive in thinking you can wait for me to regain consciousness just because I'm not dead. Worst-case scenario, I could be bedridden. You need to be prepared to defeat Celemonic yourselves. But, well, don't worry. I've left

instructions that even a brain-dead monkey couldn't screw up.

Rude!

First, I am going to give you a brief explanation of the maze. There are no traps on basement floors one to five, which were built like a maze. This is simply to buy time to make you all familiar with the maze system. Carefully read through the manual the earth serpent is about to bring you and answer the questions.

Kiriko and I accept the scroll the earth serpent brings us, but Jonde faces the bucket monitors.

“Jonde?”

“No matter how good the Hero's foresight is, there is no way to predict every possible outcome. Besides, he wrote these letters before even encountering Celemonic, correct? We cannot rely on them. I am going to keep an eye on Celemonic.”

“B-but, Jonde...! Please read what it says here! ‘If Celemonic possesses the power to teleport, turn to page 341’!”

“I-impossible! How did he know?!”

“He was probably considering countless possibilities before even seeing Celemonic. Having excellent foresight is so like Seiya. Oh! That's not all! ‘If Celemonic is a beastkin, turn to page 2,687. For vampire types, turn to page 4,743.’ And...oh! Here it is! ‘If Celemonic has two heads, turn to page 7,878’!”

“...?! Why is there even a page for that?! This has gone beyond normal foresight!”

“Ugh! Jonde! Just shut up and watch Celemonic on the monitors if that's what you want to do!”

After that, Kiriko and I read the manual, answer the questions, and select the right choices, but...after some time goes by, Jonde suddenly yells: “Hey! Celemonic is walking down the staircase to the sixth basement floor! That monster already cleared the maze!”

Celemonic got through it quicker than expected. Obviously, they must have

teleported through it. Regardless, Kiriko and I have already finished reading the manual.

I stand by Jonde's side and gaze at the bucket showing a bird's-eye view of the sixth basement floor. Unlike the complicated mazelike floors earlier, the sixth level is a simple path with only two turns leading to the next staircase.

The head with disheveled hair yawns.

"What a long, drawn-out maze that turned out to be."

Monica replies:

"It was over in no time, since we teleported through it, though... Oh? I wonder what that sound is."

Just as she's going around the corner, Celemonic notices the giant boulder rolling right at them, but they aren't even startled!

"*Tch*. A boulder trap. What do you wanna do? Not like we can teleport to the other side of the boulder, since it's blocking our view."

I become certain of something when I hear Celena.

It's just as Seiya predicted. They can teleport only to places they can see!

Only when Celemonic turns around in order to escape do they realize that a giant boulder is closing in on them from behind as well!

"Perfect! The monster has nowhere to escape! They're going to be crushed!"

Jonde cheers. However...

"Up, Celena. We can dodge a boulder of this size."

They vanish and reappear, now hanging from the ceiling of the passage.

"They dodged the boulders?!"

"J-just like a spider!"

The boulders slam into each other and come to a stop. As Jonde clicks his tongue and both of Celemonic's heads cackle, I press a button on the deck.

Kabooooooooom!!

The powerful explosion startles Jonde, and the video in the bucket shows only

white smoke.

“Wh-what was that?!”

“Seiya’s instructions said to press the button if Celemonic dodges the boulders. They were actually remote bomb boulders.”

“He assumed we were going to dodge, so he used bomb boulders to blow us up?! What kind of Hero does that?!”

Another earth-serpent camera at a different angle shows Celemonic with their dress in tatters due to the explosion. Celena screams: “My back... Damn it! My baaaaaack...!”

“Relax, Celena. It’s no more than a mild burn.”

“D-damn them! Damn them all! I’m going to kill that Hero, his friends, and every last person on this continent!”

Celena starts spewing curses, but I try not to listen, since she scares me. I then ask Kiriko: “Kiri, what do the instructions say to do next?”

“Let me check... ‘If physical attacks are working, turn to page 8,193.’”

I check out the new instructions.

There is a trap on the seventh basement floor that will endlessly shoot arrows at Celemonic. Wait until they teleport to the corner to shoot. There is probably a short lag until they can teleport again, so capitalize on that moment and press the button.

Celemonic leisurely descends the staircase. The burn on their back doesn’t seem to have done much damage.

They soon arrive at the seventh basement floor. The floor in front of Celemonic is bumpy, making it obvious that it’s a trap, so they teleport across it and reappear in the corner. But after taking a few steps around the corner, their smug expressions vanish, for small holes suddenly appear on the walls of the path.

I press the button just like Seiya instructed me to, and arrows shoot out of the countless holes. The shafts soar toward Celemonic from every direction imaginable, giving them virtually no point of egress. It looks like they need some

time before they can teleport again, just as Seiya predicted. Celemonic is just crossing their arms, protecting both heads.

...I thought they would be full of holes after that, but when the rain of arrows comes to an end, they stand tall. Piles of broken arrows lie scattered at their feet.

Ahhh! Their defense is so high that the arrows can't pierce their body!

Celena spits on the ground.

"Hmph. Just a few scratches."

"Don't be so careless, Celena. The arrowheads were coated with poison. We need to cauterize the wounds..."

"Tch! That damn Hero...!"

When Celemonic eventually appears on the eighth basement floor, they don't use teleport. Instead, they slowly walk down the path, being extra careful of traps.

I look over Seiya's instructions.

After all that's happened, Celemonic should be extra wary of traps as they proceed. However, there aren't any on this floor.

As they slowly and nervously walk down the path, Monica's face suddenly brightens.

"Celena! I can see the next staircase!"

"Yeah! Looks like there wasn't anything on this floor! Tch! Crafty son of a—"

But the moment their foot presses down on the first step...

""Ahhhhhh!!""

Celemonic screams. A massive needle protrudes from the step after appearing out of nowhere.

Jonde mutters in astonishment:

"Now he's putting traps on the staircase?!"

"I—I can understand why they let their guard down!"

“Um... There’s a note in the instructions that says, ‘The powerful needles were made from platinum swords.’”

As black blood drips from their foot, Celemonic let out a bloodcurdling scream: ““You’re going to pay for this, Heroooooo!!””

Various traps await them on the ninth basement floor as well, such as a pit with spears that shoot out of its walls. Celemonic manages to dodge them before arriving...at a dead end. Hanging on the earthen wall is a plaque with the following message: WHAT HAS FOUR LEGS IN THE MORNING...TWO IN THE AFTERNOON...AND THREE AT NIGHT? WRITE YOUR ANSWER.

Underneath the frame is a pen. Celena tilts her head.

“This is stupid. I’m sure the staircase won’t appear if we don’t solve the riddle, but it makes no sense.”

But Monica’s lips slightly curl upward.

“I know the answer.”

“Seriously?!”

“Yes, the answer is—”

Kabooooooooom!!

I hear another explosion coming from the bucket. The earth-serpent camera is showing static as well! My utter confusion is followed by another earth serpent with another scroll.

At the end of the ninth basement floor is a trap that’s set to explode while the enemy is thinking. By the way, the answer is “a person.”

I feel a chill run down my spine.

“Wh-what an evil trap!”

“Y-yes, it’s oozing with the creator’s horrible personality.”

While it’s a dirty trap, it’s really effective. The explosion blew off Celemonic’s left hand!

“M-my haaaaaand...!”

When I take a good look at them, their body looks really beaten up: Their back is singed, their left hand is gone, and their foot is injured as well!

“Wonderful! We can defeat the monster before they even reach the thirtieth basement floor at this rate!”

I nod in agreement with Jonde’s opinion. Having looked through the manual, I already know that the traps get more intense and craftier from the tenth basement floor on.

That’s Seiya for you! I can see why he said he was perfectly prepared, despite being unconscious! It looks like we can really handle this ourselves!

...The wall before Celemonic comes crumbling down. Although they are breathing heavily, the moment they see the opening...

“Heh-heh-heh... Ha-ha-ha...”

Celemonic suddenly begins laughing.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

“Wh-what’s gotten into you, Monica?”

“This is ridiculous. Completely ridiculous. I am done playing the Hero’s games...”

“But we can’t reach ’em if we don’t go down this staircase. They’re on the bottom floor, right?”

“Don’t worry, Celena. I don’t need to use these stairs. I simply...yes...I simply need a new power to take me where the Hero is. Kind of like how we gained a new power after slaughtering our younger sister, Shanak...”

Celemonic’s right hand grabs Celena’s face.

“Y-you’re kidding, right?! Monica?!”

“Now it’s your turn to sacrifice yourself, Celena.”

“S-stop! A-ahhhhhh!!”

Crack! Squirt!

Celena’s nose is squashed as her eyeballs pop out of her head. It’s such a

cruel, horrific sight that I can't look directly at it.

"A-ah! She betrayed her own sister...?"

A crushed head hanging beside her own, Monica cackles maniacally.

"Ha-ha-ha-ha! My sister Celena's grudge shall guide me to even greater heights! I know you're watching me through the earth serpents' eyes! And now that we have even one thing that connects us, I can finally join you all at the bottom of this maze!"

We see Celemonic's hand close up on the earth-serpent monitor we're watching.

"W-well, this took a dark turn..."

Jonde mentions this while looking back at me. But at the very next instant...

"Wh-what...?!"

Kiriko screams, her voice trembling. But when I follow her gaze, I see a bloody hand sticking out of the bucket that was showing footage of Celemonic! Sparks fly, and the space around the bucket warps as she comes crawling out of it! She smirks with a ghastly expression.

"The power to teleport between dimensions...Dimension Step!"

Jonde and Kiriko freeze in place with no way to fight back.

"Oh, you poor souls. Your little traps won't work on me anymore."

Celemonic grabs my face before I can even brace myself.

"I'm going to make you suffer hundreds—no, thousands of times more than I did!"

It's a desperate situation...but at the very next moment, my face turns into sand and fades away. And it's not just my face! My entire body turns into sand before collapsing to the ground.

"Wh-what?!"

Celemonic is taken aback. Jonde and Kiriko, who were nearby, have already turned into sand as well.

...And right now, Jonde, Kiriko, and I are watching everything that's happening with a bird's-eye view through the monitor in the bucket.

Standing by my side, Jonde finally speaks up.

"H-hey?! What is that room?! What is going on?!"

"It's a fake control room that Seiya made with earthen dolls that look exactly like us."

"I—I can see that...but I thought Celemonic gained new powers that allowed her to teleport through the earth serpent to where we were watching?! So why was it connected to that fake room and not this one?!"

"Read this."

I show Jonde a scroll.

Celemonic might hijack a scout serpent to come crawling out of a monitor like a ghost. To prevent such a disaster, I will cut the connection by placing another relay point in between the earth-serpent cameras and earth-serpent monitors. By the way, the room you all are in is not the bottom floor of the underground maze. You are in an isolated underground control room more than a few dozen meters away from the underground maze. In addition, all the footage you are watching from the buckets is relayed through earth-serpent cameras in the fake control room, and the video circuits are temporarily cut off before retransmitting the data.

I boast to the former general:

"This is the underground maze's ultimate trap! The proxy room!"

A Useless Goddess's Big Moment

"Tch...!"

After realizing it was a trap, Celemonic tries turning on her heel, but the room itself is instantly swallowed by a blinding light.

It's an explosion so powerful that it makes all the other traps' explosions seem like child's play. The monitor shows static, leading us to think that the earth serpent capturing the footage was destroyed in the blast as well. By the time another emerges from the ground in the proxy room and begins filming...

"Kff...! Hff...!"

Celemonic is lying facedown on the ground and twitching. In addition to the left hand she lost on the ninth basement floor, she just lost her right leg as well. She's barely breathing. Suddenly, fire spews from all four walls, scorching everything in sight. The ceiling then emits a creaking noise before collapsing to crush Celemonic.

"D-did he really have to go that far?!"

Jonde gasps at the inhumane trap.

The proxy room is the last line of defense. Therefore, Celemonic must be stopped here at all costs.

Celemonic is assailed mercilessly, just like he alluded to in his instructions.

After the descended ceiling returns to its original position, Celemonic doesn't budge.

"I-is she dead?"

"I'll check!"

While I couldn't earlier, I may be able to use this now that she has been thoroughly incapacitated.

Figuring I have nothing to lose, I use Scan.

VENGEFUL EMPRESS CELEMONIC

LV: 99
(MAX)

HP:	MP:
1/666,666	1/66,666

ATK:	DEF:	SPD:	MAG:	GRW:
666,666	666,666	666,666	6,666	999 (MAX)

Resistance: Fire, Wind, Water, Lightning, Ice, Earth, Dark, Poison, Paralysis, Sleep, Curse, Instant Death, Status Ailments

Special Abilities: Dark God’s Blessing (LV: MAX), Cursed Blast (LV: MAX), FoV Teleport (LV: MAX), Dark Resilience (LV: MAX)

Skills: Grudge Hand, Stealth Step, Dimension Step, Bloody Systeria

Personality: Tenacious

“I—I can see her status! She only has one HP left!”

“Hmm... The monster is still alive even after all that... What resilience...!”

“She has a special ability called Dark Resilience! We probably need to use holy magic to finish her off!”

I turn to Kiriko.

“Hey, Kiri, is there any way to get to where Celemonic is from here?”

“Um... Oh...! Yep! There’s a page here called ‘Using the Underground Elevator

to Get to the Proxy Room’!”

After letting out a deep breath, I firmly declare: “I’ll go deliver the final blow!”

But Kiriko holds out a scroll to me.

“B-but, Rista...! Look at what it says here! ‘Do not even get near the proxy room unless it is an emergency.’”

“But she only has one HP and one MP left! She’s pretty much dead already! All she needs is one good hit, and it’s over! Besides, Celemonic doesn’t seem to have a weapon with Chain Destruction, so she can’t kill me!”

“I-it would be better to kill her, considering she could still recover and start transcending dimensions again...”

I pull an earth serpent from my dress and hand it to Kiriko as she squirms worriedly.

“It’s an earth-serpent phone. We can use this to communicate in case something goes wrong, so we’ve got nothing to worry about, okay?”

“But...I’m still worried something might happen...”

“It’ll be fine! I trained under the Goddess of Wealth for times like this!”

Jonde places a hand on Kiriko’s shoulder.

“The goddess has made up her mind, Kiriko. We have to believe in her.”

“Y-you’re right!”

“I’ll be back in no time!”

I read the page titled “Using the Underground Elevator to Get to the Proxy Room,” then head to the corner of the room. After an earth serpent appears, I show it the page and firmly nod. I should be able to go where Celemonic is now.

After I wave to Jonde and Kiriko, my body gets sucked into the ground.

Similarly to gradually rising back to the surface with Cave Along, I am transported through the ground until I reach the proxy room. I find Celemonic lying on the ground a short distance away.

“Goddess, can you hear me?”

I suddenly hear Jonde's voice coming out of the earth serpent near my chest.

"Yes, I can. I just arrived at the proxy room."

"Please be careful, Rista."

"I'll be fine. I'll make it quick."

After taking in a deep breath...I hold a hand over Celemonic and strain my voice: "Hey, heeey! Hey, hey, heeey!"

I suddenly hear a commotion from the other side of the phone.

"What does this goddess think she's doing?! All she's doing is yelling, 'Hey'!"

"R-Rista?!"

Even then, I continue in high spirits...but nothing seems to be happening to Celemonic.

"Goddess!! Stop messing around! This isn't a festival, you know!"

I—I know that! Ugh! Give me a break! The holy spell won't work if I don't chant!

"Hey, hey, hey! Hey, hey, heeey! Hey, heeeey!"

Amid the complaints, I continue loudly chanting until Jonde's anger turns into disappointment and sighs.

"I—I should have never put my faith in the Goddess of Festivals!"

Hey!! Take that back!! And what's going on with this spell?! It doesn't seem to be working no matter how long I chant! Baldr...! That phony excuse for a goddess! I'm gonna beat the crap out of her next time I see her!

As I approach Celemonic to make the spell more effective, Celemonic suddenly grabs my wrist with her battered arm!

"Ahhhhhh!!"

"Ough...! Oooough...!"

A groan teeming with resentment escapes her toothless mouth cavity.

"G-Goddess! Kiriko, to the proxy room!"

“O-okay!”

I almost want to cry as Celemonic latches on to my arm.

Ahhhhhh! So this is how it's going to end?! I'm just going to make things worse again?!

While regretting my decision, I suddenly notice something.

“G-guh... Ah...! Gwaaah!!”

Celemonic is groaning in pain!

“H-huh...?”



A pale light shoots out of my hand and wraps around her!

I-it's working?! Y-yes!! It's time to get even more serious! Arise, goddess powers! Go beyond! Plus ultraaaaaaaaaa!

“Hey, hey, heeeey! Hey, hey, hey, heeeey! H-hey, heeeey! Hey, hey, heeeey! Hey, h-h-heeeey! H-hey! Hey! Hey! Hey! Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, hey...”

I have never said “hey” this many times in my entire life, even if you add up every time I’ve ever greeted someone with it.

“Goddess of Festivals! Are you all right?!”

“Rista!”

Jonde and Kiriko emerge from the ground and gasp at the sight. The holy light dried out Celemonic’s body like a mummy, and before long, her hand lifelessly slips off my wrist and falls to the ground.

“D-did you kill her...?”

“I think so... Let me check just to make sure.”

Putting emphasis on her health, I use Scan until her status is displayed in my eyes.

VENGEFUL EMPRESS CELEMONIC

LV: 99 (MAX)

HP: 0/666,666

“Her HP is at zero! She’s dead!”

I shout out to them, but they simply stare back in silence.

Ack! They must be fed up with me. I don't blame them, though... I mean, that was dangerous. Sigh... Why did it have to turn out like this? I'm such a los—

“Bravo, Goddess! I apologize for ever even doubting you!”

“...Huh?”

“Rista! You beat Celemonic even without Seiya! That was amazing!”

“Wh-what? It was nothing special...”

I return a modest reply, but...

Yahoooooooooooo!!

I scream in my heart, overjoyed by all the praise.

I'm able to open a gate now that Celemonic has been defeated. Jonde slips through it while carrying Seiya, and we return to a world with two glowing moons hanging over us. It's night in the spirit world. Since Jonde can't enter the sanctuary due to the powerful divine energy, we get Cerceus to carry Seiya back to my room and put him in my bed.

I am rubbing Seiya's cheeks, overcome with worry, when Cerceus jokes: “I never expected this Hero to fall. Finally got what was coming to him. Ha-ha-ha!”

“I wonder how Seiya would react if he knew you said that, Cerceus?”

“I'm sorry. Please don't tell him, okay? Promise me. Just...please don't tell him. I'm serious. I beg you. Please.”

Just then, Aria walks into the room.

“Rista, Great Goddess Ishtar would like to see you. I'll watch over Seiya while you're gone, okay?”

While dragging myself to Ishtar's room alone, I think to myself: *What in the world does she want to see me for? ...Ah?! Is it because I dealt the final blow against Celemonic?! Was that against the rules?!*

Nervous that I was going to receive even greater punishment in the innermost plane of the spirit world, I open the door and let myself in, but my fears turn out to be groundless.

“You will not be punished, Ristarte. Although unconscious, it was Seiya

Ryuuguuin's earth magic that led to Celemonic's demise, correct? You simply followed his instructions and defeated her. You did not break any rules."

Thank goodness! ...Wait. Then why does she want to talk to me?

Out of nowhere, Ishtar suddenly lowers her head to me.

"Huh?! Great Goddess Ishtar?!"

"It has become difficult to see the future because of the demon in Ixphoria."

She gives me a deeply troubled look.

"I am so sorry. It is my fault that Seiya Ryuuguuin was mentally pushed over the edge. While he may be strong, he is still human... I should have never told him about *that*."

"Uh... What exactly is '*that*'?"

After a few moments of silence, she replies:

"I will tell you when the time comes."

"O-okay..."

Ishtar then smiles and attempts to change the subject.

"Ristarte, you did a wonderful job supporting the Hero while he was unable to fight. There is no need to worry about Seiya Ryuuguuin. I am sure he will be regaining consciousness shortly."

After talking to Ishtar, I grab a damp towel and head back to my room, where Seiya is sleeping, but when I open the door, Aria and Cerceus are no longer there.

Wait! Does that mean...?!

"S-Seiya...! You're awake!"

Seiya is already sitting up in the bed and gazing out the window.

"You must be exhausted, though. Don't push yourself and get some rest."

But he doesn't say a word. This is Seiya, after all. He must be really annoyed at himself for passing out in the middle of battle.

"Don't worry! We defeated Celemonic! Oh, uh... You don't believe me? But

we're back in the spirit world, which is proof we won! Kiri and Jonde are okay, too, so there's nothing to worry about!"

But even then, Seiya continues staring out the window with a solemn look on his face.

"Hey, Seiya? What did Ishtar say to you? She won't tell me..."

No answer. I raise my voice.

"S-Seiya! You don't need to keep things bottled up all to yourself! I want you to rely more on us—on me! H-helping you is my job!"

My feelings pour out, unable to be contained any longer. I approach Seiya and wrap my arms around him from behind. He isn't receptive, but I bury my face in his large back and tell him how I really feel.

"I know it hurts. I know you blame yourself for all those deaths. It's something you're never prepared for. But, Seiya...you're not alone. I will always be by your side...!"

I want to melt the ice around his heart. So I squeeze Seiya even tighter, and then...

Fwssshhh!

Seiya's body turns into sand and falls, scattering across the floor! I scream.

"Eeeeeeeeeeeek! I just wanted to melt the ice around his heart, not his entire body!!"

W-w-wait! Use your brain, Rista... It's a clay doll! Hold on! But that was a really touching scene! I was opening up to a doll that whole time?!

I turn around to find Seiya glaring at me with the coldest eyes I have ever seen.

I somehow manage to string a few words together:

"Wh-wh-why is there a clay doll in my room?"

"Because I didn't want you to make a move on me while I was in a weakened state."

"Why would I do that?! M-more importantly...did you, uh...did you see all

that?”

“Yep, I saw everything.”

Nooooooooooooo! I’m so embarrassed!!

I’m so embarrassed that I want to die. I cover my face with both hands and collapse onto the bed. Seiya mutters: “Watching you makes everything seem so ridiculous.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!”

I yell at him, but Seiya starts heading for the door.

“Where are you going?”

“To the Summoning Chamber.”

“Are you gonna be okay by yourself?”

“I’m already better, but I’ll be staying the night here before heading back to Ixphoria, just in case.”

“Okay...”

But Seiya stops for a moment before the door, then quietly says: “Rista, I owe you one.”

“Huh...?”

The door shuts behind him.

After Seiya leaves, I frantically roll around the bed. *“Rista, I owe you one.”* *“Rista, I owe you one.”*... I repeat what Seiya said in my head while giggling and smiling in glee. But all of a sudden, I remember what Queen Carmilla said after Grandleon was defeated.

“All you need to do is stand by him. Just be by his side in this cruel world. Make a fool of yourself, make mistakes—because that’s what’s saving him whether you know it or not.”

While it’s not ideal...I feel like I can be me!

I feel like my value as a goddess was finally acknowledged, and I cannot even express how happy that makes me.

That night, I have a dream about Seiya. It's probably because I can still feel his warmth in the bed. In the dream, I'm Princess Tiana, Seiya is by my side, and I'm holding an adorable baby in my arms. Despite his usual cold personality, Seiya smiles sweetly as he looks at the baby and me.

I guess this is what they call "lucid dreaming." I am aware this is a dream even though I'm asleep.

Even after defeating the Demon Lord of Ixphoria, Seiya didn't return to his world and stayed with me instead. After that, our baby was born, and we lived out the rest of our days in Termine together...

If the wheel of fate had spun in a different direction, then perhaps this could have been our future. Just thinking about it twists my heart. In order to forget the pain, I raise my hand to rub the baby's head...but when I see its face, I freeze.

Long hair! A smashed-in nose! Before I even realized it, the baby's face has turned into that of a mangled woman!

I try to escape, but the baby tightly latches on to my chest and won't let go! It opens its toothless mouth cavity and groans: "I am Shanak, the younger sister of Celemonic..."

The bloody face suddenly appears only a hairbreadth away from mine!

"I will curse you until your soul is sent back to the heavens. A curse that can even kill a god—the Vengeful Empress Celemonic's final curse—Bloody Systeria."

Bloody Systeria

“Ahhhhhhh!”

The instant I wake up, I’m already jumping out of the bed. Sweat drips down my entire body.

Wh-what the hell?! What a horrible dream that was!

I gaze at the gentle morning sun peering through the window as I try to get my breathing under control.

Whew... I need to do something to take my mind off what I just saw. I guess I’ll go to Cerceus’s café and have a cup of coffee...

While changing into my usual dress...

Thud! Thud! Thud!

I hear a violent knock at the door.

“Keep your pants on. Damn. Who’s th—? Huh?!”

I open the door and shudder. Aria; Adenela; Cerceus; and even the Goddess of Fire, Hestiaca; the God of Lightning, Orand...and numerous other gods who live in the sanctuary are there.

“Wh-wh-what’s going on?!”

I scream.

Orand then yells:

“That’s what we want to know, Ristarte! We just sensed a powerful evil aura coming from your room!”

“What...?”

Aria places a hand over her mouth and points at me in terror.

“R-Rista...! Evil energy is pouring out of your body!”

“What a sinister aura!”

I idly stare into the distance, clueless as to what they mean. While most of the deities take a few steps back, Adenela approaches me, takes my left hand, and stares at it.

“Th-this is a c-curse. The caster t-touched your arm, right?”

Adenela holds up my wrist so I can see for myself. There’s a dark handprint around my arm.

“Wh-what the...?!”

So that wasn’t a dream?!

“I-it’s the Vengeful Empress Celemonic’s final curse, Bloody Systeria!”

I repeat what I heard in my dream as I tremble in fear. However, Aria manages to put on a smile for me.

“Don’t worry, Rista. We’re in the spirit world. We’ll find a way to get rid of it.”

Cerceus nods in agreement as well, albeit with a slightly tense expression.

“B-besides, deities don’t die even if we’re cursed! You probably shouldn’t worry about it too much.”

“Y-yeah... You’re right!”

“Anyway, let’s go talk to Great Goddess Ishtar and hear what she has to say.”

When Aria and I leave the room, Seiya is leaning against the hallway’s wall.

“Oh, Seiya! Give me a few minutes, okay? I’ll be quick!”

“...All that demonic energy oozing out of your body says otherwise.”

Seiya briefly exhales, then walks over to me.

“I’m coming with you.”

After that, Aria, Seiya, and I head to Ishtar’s room together.

“Excuse us...”

Following Aria, Seiya and I walk into Ishtar’s room. Sitting in her usual chair,

Ishtar puts on a stern expression and speaks before I can even get a word in.

“Ristarte’s body is covered in a black mist. It has been a long time since I have seen such a powerful curse. The caster must have sacrificed herself to cast it.”

Ishtar continues:

“The souls of deities and heroes are only temporary Astral Souls, and Chain Destruction is a magical device that can destroy the true soul, the Divine Soul, by destroying the Astral Soul.”

The tiny hairs on my body stand straight up when I hear Ishtar suddenly bring up Chain Destruction.

“G-Great Goddess Ishtar...! Are you saying...?!”

“Yes, this curse possesses the same powers as Chain Destruction. When the curse is finished, your Divine Soul will be destroyed.”

“D-d-does that mean I’m gonna die?!”

I almost faint. While Aria and I are speechless, Seiya asks: “Is there any way to break the curse?”

“The Dark God’s power is preventing me from seeing Ristarte’s future. Therefore, everything I say from here is conjecture. In order to break the curse, you must use a holy spell of even greater power. Another option would be to make the curse sense that the Divine Soul has ascended to the heavens or has been destroyed.”

Ascended to the heavens?! Destroyed?! So I die either way?!

“Hey, Granny, are you sure this isn’t connected to the Dark God’s powers as well? Couldn’t we weaken the curse if we stopped the Dark God’s Blessing from being sent to Celemonic?”

“The curse was not caused by the blessing but by Celemonic herself. In addition, Celemonic no longer exists, and only her curse remains. Therefore, it would probably not be broken even if you were to weaken the Dark God’s Blessing.”

“I see. How much time do we have until her soul is destroyed?”

Ishtar glances at me, then admits:

“Judging by the amount of evil energy coming from Ristarte...she would probably be lucky to make it through the night.”

J-just one night?!

Seiya turns to me.

“Rista, open a gate.”

“Huh?”

“First, we’re going to Ixphoria to check Celemonic’s body. There might be a clue.”

“O-okay...”

I don’t want to see Celemonic’s corpse again, but I’m in no position to make demands.

“Seiya, Rista, be careful...”

And just like that, I open a gate to the underground proxy room while Aria and Ishtar see us off.

...After so many traps were sprung, the proxy room is a mess, with buckets scattered about and the wall crumbling. Celemonic’s body is just as we left it—lying facedown on the floor with one hand and one leg missing.

“Huh? Seiya?”

I suddenly realize Seiya isn’t with me. With the door slightly ajar, he’s peeking into the room with one eye.

“...What are you doing?”

“Is Celemonic really dead? Even if she is, how do I know for sure she still can’t curse me? I can’t afford to be cursed right now.”

“Sh-she’s dead. Trust me. Besides, I was only cursed because she grabbed my wrist. You’ll be fine, Seiya.”

Putting a powerful curse on someone requires stringent conditions...and she unfortunately held my wrist long enough to be able to meet those conditions.

After finally coming out of the gate, Seiya squints at Celemonic.

“She’s all shriveled up. Did you do this?”

“Y-yeah, she shriveled up after being exposed to my holy magic.”

“In other words, you came into the proxy room and tried to deliver the final blow, which resulted in you being cursed.”

“Er... Sorry...”

But Seiya doesn’t reprimand me for ignoring his instructions.

“Well, I’m partly to blame for what happened this time.”

Seiya mutters those few words, then begins poking Celemonic’s body with his sword’s sheath.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

“Examining the body.”

Seiya continues using his sheath to flip Celemonic over and roll her around after that, but he eventually turns his gaze toward me.

“I’ve confirmed her death. Now we know your curse wasn’t caused by Celemonic still being alive.”

“O-oh, so that’s what you were checking for...”

“All right, let’s go meet with this goddess who taught you holy magic.”

We end up not gaining any information in the proxy room, other than the fact that Celemonic is, in fact, dead. But before we head back to the spirit world, Seiya uses his earth magic to drop the Vengeful Empress’s remains deep into the planet’s core—as is tradition.

The gate takes us to the tile-roofed house in the Divine Forest. I open the wooden door and let myself into the home of the Goddess of Wealth, Baldr. Sitting in the tatami-matted room, Baldr greets me with a smile.

“Oh my. Look who it is. Have you come to than—Ahhhhhh!!”

But she screams when I get close enough.

“Wh-what an ominous aura! What a frightening curse! Go! Get out of my

house!”

She grabs the vase on the altar and starts pelting us with the salt it contains.

“Pfff! Wh-what are you doing?! Madam Baldr! We—”

“You couldn’t pay me enough to remove that curse! It is far too powerful! Now go!”

Seiya knits his brow while watching Baldr furiously pelt us with salt.

“Who’s the salt-throwing hag? The Goddess of Seasoning or something?”

“N-no, that’s actually the deity who taught me holy magic...”

After approaching Baldr, Seiya swipes the vase from her hand, flips it upside-down, and slides it over her head.

“Ah?! I—I can’t see anything!! And...the salt...! My eyes...! My eyyyyessssss!!”

Seiya then casually turns on his heel.

“We don’t have time for this. Let’s go.”

“O-okay...”

After that, at Seiya’s request, I open a gate that leads to the rooftop of the sanctuary. It looks like he’s going to see if the second-highest-ranking deity, Valkyrie, can help. She indirectly told us about the Goddess of Warfare, Zet, before, so she might have a solution that Ishtar wouldn’t be able to tell us.

Wearing nothing but chains, the half-naked goddess is painting her latest disasterpiece on the rooftop, but when Seiya approaches her, she puts down her brush. After they exchange a few words, Valkyrie walks over to me.

“All right, Rista, you got it. I’ll help.”

She then places her right hand on my face.

“Huh? Valkyrie...?”

“It’s simple. We just need to trick the curse into thinking you died.”

“W-wait! Valkyrie, d-don’t tell me you’re—!”

“The Fifth Valkyrja: Shadow Break!”

“Blargh?!”

Everything suddenly fades to black, giving me no time to even feel pain.

...Some time goes by until I finally regain consciousness. Actually, I don't know if *regain consciousness* is the right phrase... At any rate, I can see myself on the ground surrounded by Seiya and Valkyrie. My skull is crushed, and it's so grotesque that I almost faint.

Ahhhhhhh!! Valkyrie killed me?! Does that mean I'm a ghost now?! Did she really have to go that far?! Ugh! B-but on second thought, she was just trying to help, and if it worked, then...

But while I'm staring at myself, an ominous aura begins emanating from my physical body until it gradually takes the form of a person! It then transforms into a monster with the heads of two women!

Eek!! Celemonic!!

The materialized Celemonic's missing hand and leg have regenerated, but Celena's and Monica's faces are still bloody and crushed. Then, black blood begins spewing from the gap between Celemonic's heads, and the skin begins rising until a new head pops out! It's covered in blood, and both of its eye sockets are but hollow black holes!

Is that Shanak?!

For some reason, neither Seiya nor Valkyrie notices our presence. Perhaps Celemonic and I aren't ghosts or spiritual bodies but our own consciousnesses.

Celemonic gropes around at the ground as she approaches my body. She then crouches and mutters: “Are you dead? Are you dead? Are you dead? Are you dead? Are you dead? Are you dead?”

She promptly rises back to her feet. Suddenly twisting her neck, she then unsteadily drags her feet over to *me*! She shouldn't be able to see anything, so how does she even know I'm here—and with such precision?!

Ahhhhhhh!

I try to run away, but I can't move my body! After grabbing me, she brings her bloody face toward mine and howls as if her voice were echoing from the

depths of hell: “You’re not dead you’re not dead you’re not dead you’re not dead you’re not dead you’re not dead you’re not dead you’re not dead you’re not dead...”

“Ahhhhhhhhhh!”

I scream once again and open my eyes.

“R-Rista?! Are you okay?!”

Aria leans in with a worried gaze.

“H-huh? Where am...?”

I look around to discover I’m in my room. Seiya, Cerceus, Adenela, and even Valkyrie are here. I nervously touch my face, which Valkyrie destroyed, but it feels like it’s back to normal.

“Hey, Aria...how long was I asleep?”

“About two hours. We actually kept trying everything we could think of while you were asleep, but...”

I suddenly notice that Ishtar is in the crowd of deities as well, despite the fact that she almost never leaves her room. When she gazes at me with those sorrowful eyes, I honestly think to myself: *Oh. I’m not going to make it. It’s over.*

I grab Aria’s hand.

“Aria, please take care of the rest after I’m gone. Save Ixphoria with Seiya and the others.”

“*Sniffle...*! Rista! But...! But...!”

Tears run down her cheeks. I gently rub Aria’s head, then turn to Cerceus by her side.

“Cerceus, where are Jonde and Kiriko?”

“They’re at my café. They’re really worried about you.”

“Please tell them I’m sorry.”

“O-okay, I will...! *Sniffle...*! Th-this...this is all too much for me!”

After Cerceus covers his face with both hands and dashes out of the room, I

shift my attention to Seiya, who's by my side.

"Seiya, you made me so happy yesterday when you said, '*I owe you one.*' Ever since our journey in Ixphoria began, all I did was get in the way, but I felt like I finally accomplished something, and I'm proud of that. But if you could..."

I muster up the courage and continue:

"There's just one last thing I want you to do for me..."

Everyone's watching, but I don't feel that embarrassed, since I know this is the end.

"C-could you...kiss me? It could just be on the cheek..."

I bashfully grin.

"Oh, and this doesn't have to be some kind of romantic thing or whatever, so don't worry about me being a goddess or you being a human. It's just...we went through so much together, so...just think of it as a kiss good-bye."

"Rista..."

Seiya wears a serious expression as he leans in toward me.

This is it. I have nothing to regret now...

And...

Whack!

Seiya slams his fist onto the crown of my head.

"Pweeep?!"

The fierce blow causes a weird sound to erupt from my mouth, creating a stir among the spectating deities.

"I-is that how humans kiss now?!"

"It looked like he punched her to me!"

"M-maybe it was a kiss that looked like a punch?!"

As the deities spread misinformation among themselves, I scream: "What part of that made you think it was a kiss?! That was most definitely a punch!"

“Oh, right! How embarrassing! Duh!”

I ignore their reactions—oh, how strangely accepting they were—and accost Seiya.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!”

Seiya interjects with a “hmph.”

“You still look fine to me.”

“Th-this is good-bye, and yet, you’re still gonna treat me like that?! I can’t believe you!!”

“Who decided this was good-bye? Did you really try everything you could?”

“Huh...?”

Seiya looks down at me with a steely gaze.

“Don’t give up so easily. Keep fighting until the bitter end. I already made up my mind: no more regrets. That goes for you, too.”

“Seiya...?”

“There’s still time before the curse is complete. There’s still hope. Follow me.”

“A-ahhh?!”

Seiya jerks me out of bed, then adds:

“You too, Grandma.”

“O-okay.”

While leading Ishtar and me by the arm, Seiya pushes his way through the other deities and exits the room.

Of Gods and Men

“Hey, Seiya! Where are you taking us?”

Seiya continues walking while pulling Ishtar and me along. But when we arrive on the third floor of the sanctuary, Ishtar finally speaks up.

“Seiya Ryuuguuin, do you plan on getting the three pillars involved?”

“Yes. I’m going to borrow the Goddess of Time’s powers. While it carries some risk, it’s our only option.”

Oh...! Does Seiya plan on using Chronoa’s power to revert my body back to a time before I was cursed?! B-but...!

“Our divine order prohibits altering time and space. It is beyond taboo. What you wish to do is essentially impossible.”

Seiya continues walking, not even looking back as Ishtar talks.

“All you need to do is introduce me to this Goddess of Time.”

We stop at a door at the end of the hall on the third floor. It’s the Chamber of Eternal Stasis, which leads to the innermost plane of the spirit world. While Seiya may have heard about it from Aria, this is the first time he has ever gone inside. After having Ishtar cast the spell to open the door, Seiya enters. We walk past the souls of the gods lined up on the shelves before eventually finding a large painting before us. It’s a mysterious landscape of a meandering path leading to a sanctuary on top of a hill, but this painting itself is the entrance to the innermost plane. Ishtar stands before it, then turns back and faces Seiya with a serious look on her face.

“Seiya Ryuuguuin, please be careful. Long ago, a deity once came to the innermost plane to make a request. However, they could not come to an agreement, which is what eventually triggered Armagezeeda, the war of the unified spirit world.”

Armagezeeda...

The Goddess of Warfare, Zet, once spoke of that war as well. I was reborn as a goddess in the spirit world a hundred years ago, so the war must have happened long before that. Regardless, it's hard to believe there was ever a war in such a peaceful world.

Ishtar reminds Seiya:

"Please just make sure you do not offend the deities of the innermost plane."

"Don't worry. I've got this."

After walking inside the painting, we follow the path until we reach the stone steps before the sanctuary. Ishtar stops and gets on one knee, so I follow her lead.

"Goddess of Time, Chronoa, pillar of the heart of the spirit world, I, the highest-ranking deity of the unified spirit world—Ishtar—have come with a request."

The door to the sanctuary slowly opens.

...Last time I was here, when the gods reduced my punishment, I could only hear her voice and couldn't see her, but this time Chronoa appears with a blinding light.

"Wh-what beauty...!"

I find myself enchanted by her beauty to the point of even forgetting the difficult situation I'm in. She has a divine aura, and white wings extend from her back, unlike the deities of the spirit world, who usually have theirs sealed away. She wears a gorgeous dress and has long, tied-back hair. I have never seen a goddess this beautiful and noble before.

"I have come at your request, Ishtar."

Chronoa walks toward us with a cheerful smile, but when she sees me, her face is overcome with sympathy.

"Oh, Ristarte...you poor thing. What a terrible curse. I wish I could use my power to rewind your time to a point when you weren't cursed—"

“I will not allow it.”

A deep voice echoes, and Chronoa shrugs.

“—but this wretch will not allow it.”

“Going back in time violates the laws of the divine.”

I have heard this dignified voice before. It’s Nemesiel, the God of Logic and Reason. He argued against returning my healing magic last time. I see him as a very stern, stubborn god, but I am sure Chronoa won’t do anything without his permission.

While others fall silent, Seiya says to Chronoa:

“Who cares? Just ignore him.”

Who does Seiya think he is?!

It sounds like Nemesiel heard what Seiya said as well. He’s furious.

“Hold your tongue, human! I am the God of Logic and Reason, Nemesiel!”

The door to the sanctuary bursts open!

“H-he’s huge...!”

A massive god around five meters tall comes walking out. His goatee accents his awe-inspiring face and body, which look like they were carved out of stone. The air around him is a thousand times more intimidating and dignified than the aura surrounding Cerceus. The ground shakes as Nemesiel marches over to Seiya.

“S-S-Seiya! Don’t you think you should apologize?!”

But Seiya doesn’t say a word. He simply looks up at the colossal god who towers over him.

“My will is the will of this realm! Altering time and space is forbidden! You must not reverse Ristarte’s time!”

The power behind his words makes me tremble. Even Ishtar freezes. Nevertheless, Seiya doesn’t blink.

“I am not asking to have her time reversed to before she was cursed. All I

want is to be sent back to the battle against Demon Lord Ultimaesus one year ago, so Rista and I can watch close-up.”

What?! You want to watch the battle against the Demon Lord?! H-how is that related to my curse?!

I have no idea what Seiya’s intentions are, but Ishtar seems to have an epiphany.

“I see. That actually could work, and Seiya Ryuuguuin would not even have to alter time and space.”

“Wh-what do you mean?” I ask Ishtar—

“You don’t need to know.”

—but Seiya promptly cuts me off.

Wh-why can’t I know?! This is about me!

Nemesiel glares at Seiya and suggests:

“Then have Ishtar show you the past through her crystal ball.”

“No, it would be pointless unless I actually travel to the past to see it happen close-up.”

“A time paradox could occur if the Demon Lord, a monster, or anyone else sees you two. It would destroy Ixphoria.”

“I’ll transform us into monsters so that doesn’t happen. Furthermore, I will use Cave Along to hide underground if there is enough space.”

“...That won’t be necessary.”

Chronoa then hands Seiya and me cloaks.

“These are invisibility cloaks. They are divine items used to prevent paradoxes when traveling through time. Wearing these makes those who do not belong in that period invisible. Your scent, presence, and any sounds you make will be erased as well.”

N-nobody will know we’re there with these! I knew Chronoa had a kind heart!

“Simply watching the battle shouldn’t be a problem. Very well. I will send

Ristarte and Seiya Ryuuguuin back one year in time.”

Chronoa sticks out a hand over Seiya and me, but...

“Wait. I have not given you permission to do that.”

The titan stands before us. Seiya glares at him and argues.

“The Goddess of Time has made up her mind. Get out of the way. Rista doesn’t have much time left.”

“Mind how you speak to me, human!”

His enraged voice shakes the innermost plane.

“Do not make a fool of me, lest you die by my hand.”

I nervously look to Seiya...and get chills! Seiya has unsheathed his sword!

“Seiya Ryuuguuin, you mustn’t!”

Ishtar screams before I can even say a word. However, all Seiya is doing is holding the weapon. He doesn’t move.

“...What?”

Nemesiel dubiously mutters.

That’s when I realize what’s happening. A dark-crimson aura is emanating from the blade and wrapping itself around Nemesiel! As wrinkles crease his face, he suddenly realizes that his arms have begun sagging as well!

“M-my body...! What is that sword...?”

Th-that sword...! That’s the Holy Power Draining Sword that robs deities of their divine energy and weakens them!

Seiya tells the mighty deity:

“The Granny Rista Sword.”

“Stop calling it that!”

I scream at Seiya, but he continues threatening Nemesiel.

“God of Logic and Reason, Nemesiel, accept my conditions or have fun being an old man.”

“Human!!”

Nemesiel glares at Seiya, his eyes burning with rage...but Seiya is no longer there! He moved far away from the outraged god while still pointing the ominous sword at him!

“I have had enough of your games! I shall snap that Granny Rista Sword in two!”

Um... I know now might not be the appropriate time to say this, but could you please not call it that, Nemesiel?! It's embarrassing!

Nemesiel bends at the knees while facing Seiya, getting into his fighting stance! But even then, Seiya continues leveling the sword at him. Nemesiel suddenly dashes at the Hero...but what I see in the very next moment leaves me speechless.

Fwish... Fwish... Fwish... Fwish...

Nemesiel's body slowly hunkers down and shrinks the closer he gets to Seiya, as if he were undergoing reverse evolution, from man to monkey!

“Wh-whaaaaaat?!”

By the time Nemesiel reaches Seiya, he is nothing more than a hobbling old man. Chronoa, Ishtar, and I are at a loss for words. But even then, Seiya asks the old man: “Rista and I are going back in time. Is that okay?”

Nemesiel thereupon blissfully smiles as he feebly shakes.

“Of course. Enjoy yourselves.”

“Did becoming an old man make him nicer?! But aren't you worried we might cause a time paradox?!”

“A time what? What was that again? Ow, my back.”

We watch Nemesiel squat in blank amazement while Seiya looks down at the dark-crimson sword.

“Hmm. I knew this thing would come in handy.”

After a few moments of silence...

“Pffft!”

Chronoa bursts into a long-held fit of laughter.

“Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

An androgynous laugh can be heard from the sanctuary as well.

Th-this voice...! It's the Supreme Deity, Brahma...!

The God of Creation and highest-ranking deity does not show Himself, but His amused voice can be heard.

“It has been too long since I’ve last laughed like that. The God of Logic and Reason, Nemesiel, has given his approval, so go ahead and return to the past.”

Y-yes!! Brahma gave us His permission!

“However, Seiya Ryuuguuin, let me make this clear. If you and Ristarte’s positions were reversed, we would have never helped you. Ristarte is a goddess. She is our child who lives with us in the unified spirit world.”

In other words, it doesn’t matter what happens to humans. While His delivery may have been casual, his words were as cold as ice. Regardless, Seiya simply replies with a “hmph” and doesn’t say a word. He then approaches Chronoa and whispers something into her ear.

“...Okay. I can send you to that moment. I shall now transport you back one year to the battle against the Demon Lord of Ixphoria.”

Seiya and I put on our invisibility capes.

“Ristarte, listen carefully. You will only have ten minutes. Once those ten minutes are up, you will automatically be returned here.”

“O-okay!”

“Seiya Ryuuguuin, please take good care of Ristarte.”

Seiya faintly nods back to Ishtar. After that, Chronoa holds a hand before us.

“It appears you are ready to go. Be careful.”

The space around us distorts as Chronoa and Ishtar gradually move away from us.

Before I know it, I find myself in the dark with Seiya.

I-is this the Demon Lord's castle...? It makes my skin crawl...!

All of a sudden, Seiya grabs me by the arm, and we hide behind a nearby stone pillar. Despite the fact that nobody will be able to hear or see us, it's so like Seiya to be careful and hide just in case.

I peek out from behind the pillar. Slightly in the distance is the Demon Lord Ultimaesus in his final form. The horrifying creature raises his four arms into the air.

"I can feel it...! I can feel the evil energy coursing through my veins! So this is the power of the Dark God! Ixphoria now belongs to the demons!"

He must have just killed the Hero and received the Dark God's Blessing. Ultimaesus cackles as he leaves the throne room. After looking around a few times, Seiya slowly walks over to where the Demon Lord was. I quietly follow behind, but he suddenly gestures for me to stop. It looks like something's lying on the floor in front of him.

I-is that...?!

Seiya approaches it alone but returns after a few moments.

"The reckless idiot got what he deserved."

"I-is that—?"

"Yes. That was me, with my heart torn out and my head smashed."

He almost sounds like he's talking about someone else, despite having to see his own lifeless body on the ground.

"More importantly, how do you feel, Rista? Have you felt any changes?"

"M-me? *Gag...* I feel like I'm gonna throw up...!"

"That's not what I'm asking. Hmm... Strange... Aria told me that the Demon Lord killed me right after eating the child in Princess Tiana's stomach..."

Seiya nods with sudden understanding.

"Oh... So she's still alive."

"Huh?"

That's when I hear a weak voice in the darkness, and I almost have a heart attack.

"Wh-wh-what was that voice?! Is someone else here?!"

"Over there."

I timidly follow Seiya...and gasp.

"Seiya... Seiya... Where are...you...?"

Covered in blood, Tiana is lying on the ground before me. She is bleeding profusely from her stomach as rivulets of blood run from her eyes and mouth.

Th-this can't be happening! Her stomach was torn open, and her unborn child was devoured...and yet, I—Princess Tiana is still alive?!

"It's dark... It hurts... I'm scared..."

It's heartbreaking. She probably can't even see anymore. Alone in the darkness, Princess Tiana goes into convulsions as she battles against the fear of her impending death with each passing moment.

"Seiya... It hurts... Seiya..."

...!

Unable to watch any longer, I look away. However, I'm taken aback when I see Seiya, for he has removed the cloak that Chronoa gave him.

"S-Seiya?! Princess Tiana is going to see you! A time paradox is—?!"

"Her death is unavoidable. Even if she notices us, nothing will change. It won't cause a paradox."

Seiya then approaches the princess.

"Tiana, I'm right here."

She faintly smiles after hearing Seiya's voice.

"Seiya...? Is that you, Seiya?"

"Yes, it's me."

"Seiya... Thank goodness..."

Seiya takes Princess Tiana's hand.

"Hey... Am I going to die?"

"Yes. But don't be afraid. Death is just a return to what you once were before you were born."

"Seiya..."

"I'll be following right behind you. Until we meet again."

Princess Tiana's body stops moving.

...Without my even realizing it, tears have been streaming down my cheeks.

This is Seiya. He's cautious. If there was even a slight chance he'd cause a time paradox, he would have done anything he could to avoid it.

And yet...! And yet, he couldn't leave Princess Tiana alone as she painfully struggled on the brink of death!

I gaze at Seiya and the princess with tears welling in my eyes...and an evil energy suddenly shoots out of my body!

Huh?! Wh-what's happening?!

The sinister aura that was eating at my body suddenly manifests. Celemonic, with their faces smashed in, gropes around the deceased princess's body.

"Ohhhhhh! The goddess's soul has ascended to the heavens! She's dead she's dead she's dead, dead, dead, dead! The curse worked, it worked, it worked, it worked!"

Celemonic mutters, satisfied, before abruptly melting into the darkness.

...Seiya stares at my dumbfounded face.

"The evil energy is gone. It looks like it worked."

"Celemonic's curse was broken? How...?"

"After Princess Tiana died, her soul ascended to the heavens, and Celemonic's curse reacted. Since you have the same soul, she mistook it for yours, and the curse was broken."

"S-so that's what happened!"

“I didn’t tell you earlier because I was afraid it wouldn’t work if your curse heard our conversation in the heart of the spirit world.”

...Chronoa’s magic wears off, and we have only a few minutes before we are brought back to the innermost plane. I use this brief moment to say: “Seiya... thank you.”

“You don’t need to thank me. I told you. This was partially my fault.”

“No... I’m not talking about that. Thank you...for being there for Princess Tiana.”

“I just wanted Celemonic to be close enough to make sure they would think you died. Besides...”

After glancing at Princess Tiana’s body, he continues:

“Who knows if she even heard me.”

“...She did.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because I...I was so happy...!”

The tears won’t stop. After a brief pause, Seiya mutters:

“I see. Then she must have.”

The space around us eventually distorts. Time must be up. We’re then warped back to the innermost plane...

Seiya and I leave the innermost plane after deeply thanking Chronoa and Ishtar. When I open the door to the Chamber of Eternal Stasis and walk out into the hall, the stars are glittering in the night sky.

“It’s late. We’ll head back to Ixphoria tomorrow.”

“...Okay.”

There are so many things I want to say, but the words just won’t come out, and in the end, Seiya heads over to the Summoning Chamber before I can break my silence.

I wanted to spend more time with Seiya...

Now alone, I decide to head over to Aria's room to tell her I'm okay. After that, I leave the sanctuary and make my way to Café du Cerceus. Cerceus, Jonde, and Kiriko, who were sitting at a table, come rushing over the moment they see me.

"Ohhh! Ristaaa!"

"Goddess! You're okay!"

"Rista...! Thank goodness you're all right!"

"I'm sorry for worrying you. I'm going to be okay."

While Kiriko holds me in her arms, Jonde asks:

"Where is the Hero?"

"He went back to the Summoning Chamber. He said we're returning to Ixphoria tomorrow."

"Shouldn't you two rest a little more...?"

"No, it's fine. Besides, we're already late as it is thanks to me."

Cerceus brings me some coffee and a slice of cake. After chatting for a good while, I return to my room in the sanctuary.

I lie in my bed and close my eyes. My body is completely exhausted after everything that's happened.

Seiya must be tired as well. He did so much for me, despite having just recovered himself. I can never really tell what's going on in his head. But after what happened, I now know that Seiya is in just as much pain as anyone else. While he may try to make himself think he doesn't care, he really is hurting deep down. And that's why...he passed out. I didn't realize how mentally fatigued he was until Kiriko said something. As a goddess who's supposed to be there for Seiya, I find it embarrassing that Kiriko, a machine, understands him better than I do.

I need to pay more attention to Seiya from now on. I need to be there for him... A-also, was it okay that we just left Nemesiel as an old man? Eh, whatever. He'll probably change back to normal eventually.

I slowly fall asleep while pondering these things.

I suddenly find myself alone in the darkness.

H-huh? I was in my room just a second ago... Am I dreaming?

When I look around, I see someone slightly in the distance, startling me.

Is that Celemonic?! But the curse was broken!

Straining my eyes, I notice they're wearing a jet-black robe. It's as if they were wearing the darkness itself. It doesn't seem to be Celemonic, judging by their height and atmosphere.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, Goddess Ristarte."

She greets me with a husky voice. While her hood is eerily covering most of her face, I'm a little relieved it's not Celemonic.

"I'm impressed you were able to break free from Bloody Systeria. I totally thought you were a goner, but I guess there's not much I can do if you go back in time."

Her words make it sound like she was there with us, and I get goose bumps.

"Wh-what do you want?"

"Oh, don't worry about me. I'm a powerless entity who cannot kill gods or Heroes. Right now, all I can do is distort worlds. But I believe, one day, I will be able to use this power to shape the universe into its true form."

She lets out a dry laugh as she turns away from me.

"Wait!"

I try to run after her, but a powerful gale suddenly blows my way, preventing me from moving forward. I squint against the wind and find her, but she is no longer wearing her robe.

Black, white, red, blue, gold—hair of various colors overlaps and mixes together. I can see black wings poking through her hair as it trails in the wind. Immediately, the name of the demon, whom I heard mentioned a few times in Ixphoria, pops into my head.

The brindle-haired demon!!

She begins walking away but abruptly stops in her tracks. Then, without looking back at me, she says: “The man you summoned is an amazing Hero. He’s strong. He’s also careful and farsighted, but even so...Seiya Ryuuguuin will lose someone else very important to him. This is not prophecy. The future has already been determined.”

“Wh-what do you mean...?”

But the very next moment, she disappears, becoming one with the darkness.

When I open my eyes, only the lamp’s dim light faintly illuminates my room. I turn my head slightly to the side and see that it’s pitch-black outside. It must still be the middle of the night.

Was that a dream? No, that couldn’t have been a dream! The brindle-haired demon must have invaded my heart like Celemonic! B-but how could she have done that in the spirit world...?

I begin speculating on the various possibilities when I suddenly notice how heavy I feel. Moving only my head, I look down and notice the area around my stomach is swelling under the covers.

Wh-what in the...?

After mustering up some courage, I throw the covers off and...

“Oooooooooo!”

It’s the smashed-in, bloody face of a woman! Celemonic is on top of me, despite having already disappeared!

“Eeeeeeeeeek!!”

“You’re not dead you’re not dead you’re not dead you’re not dead you’re not dead you’re not dead you’re not dead you’re not dead you’re not dead—”

Celemonic continues repeating those words as if casting a curse. I notice that I can see the ceiling through their transparent body.

A-are they a ghost?! Did Celemonic come back to life as a spiritual body?!

I-is this even...?!

It doesn't seem possible, but at the same time, I'm convinced of one thing.

This must be their power...! The power of the brindle-haired demon—the Dark God of Ixphoria!

The ghost of Celemonic opens their toothless mouth right before my eyes.

"I will enter your body...and curse you with Bloody Systeria once more..."

"Mn...!"

Their arms turn into black mist as they lean forward to crawl into my body through my mouth! I try to push them off me, but my arms go right through them! They slowly approach my lips...

Th-there's nothing I can do!

Just as I'm about to give up...

"Fourth Valkyrja: Astral Break!"

I hear a familiar, calm voice echo across the room, and before I realize it, Celemonic's body is wrapped in countless chains.

"S-Seiya?! Is that you?!"

"I thought that Celemonic might come back even if we borrowed the Goddess of Time's powers and returned to the past."

W-wow! He isn't "overly cautious" for nothing! B-but where is his voice even coming from?

My eyes follow the chains until I'm looking under the bed. A few moments go by, and Seiya slowly comes crawling out!

"Eeeeeek!! What the hell were you doing under my bed?!"

"I figured something like this would happen, so I've been holding my breath under your bed since before you even went to sleep."

"Who are you, the freakin' bogeyman?!"

I—I don't know if I should feel happy or grossed out. I appreciate what he did... but the execution was creepy... Ack! I don't know how to feel!

Seiya stares at the tightly bound Celemonic and says:

“Hmm... They’re similar to the grim reaper, Crossed Thanatos, who I encountered in Gaeabrande. Well, technically, I guess I should say that the demon’s powers transformed them into something similar, which is why Astral Break, an anti-ghost attack, is working—”

But in the middle of Seiya’s analysis, Celemonic begins stirring.

“Oooooooooo!!”

As they moan with a vengeful voice, dozens—no, hundreds—of rotting arms appear all over the room.

“Eeeeeek! What’s going on?!”

A few arms extend from under Celemonic as well, grab the chains, and snap them in half!

“Wh-what?! They destroyed the Astral Chains!”

Hundreds of arms wriggle out of the ceiling, walls, and floor like snakes. And Celemonic, freed from the chains, comes right for me!

“Die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die...”

Their powers of vengeance are even stronger because they’re a ghost! The room has become Celemonic’s territory! What are we gonna do now?!

Feeling like I’m in a nightmare with nowhere to run, I turn to Seiya. He maintains his calm demeanor and explains: “Up until a few moments ago, Celemonic didn’t exist any longer. Only their curse remained. But now that the Dark God has brought them back as a ghost, I can defeat them.”

“H-how?!”

“Before I hid under your bed, I placed six barrier stones around this room. I also obtained some of Celemonic’s hair. Furthermore, I performed the Celestial Sword Dance within a five-hundred-meter radius of you for three hours.”

“Wait! Did you...?!”

Seiya unsheathes the platinum sword. It shines brilliantly, as if the sword itself were emitting light.

“Hexagram Ritual of Retribution: Sacred Sword.”

The room is engulfed in a blinding light that slowly erases the countless squirming arms of darkness.

That's the secret ritual he learned from Ishtar to defeat Grandleon! I wasn't expecting him to use it now!

The light wave gradually disintegrates Celemonic's astral body. Their flesh peels off, but they still inch toward me like an undead.

"Di...e... Die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die, die—"

"Eeeeeek!"

Wh-wh-what malice!

I tremble in fright, but Celemonic's astral body is wrapped in chains the very next moment! First, their feet, then their torso and neck are constrained as well! That's when I realize that the chains of destruction aren't only in Seiya's hands but are stretching out from the floor and walls!

Seiya fixes Celemonic with a piercing gaze.

"Astral Break. Astral Break. Astral Break. Astral Break. Astral Break. Astral Break. Astral Break. Astral Break. Astral Break..."

Eek?! This is pretty horrifying in its own way, too!

The chains gradually fill the room, even binding Celemonic's mouth shut as they repeatedly chant "die." The chains continue encircling their body until it looks like they're inside a cocoon.

Seiya glares at the tightly wrapped monster and tugs the chains he's holding, instantly constricting the swollen cocoon. Jet-black energy then squelches out from between the chains with a *squish*.

...Celemonic is nowhere to be found after Seiya's chains of destruction vanish.

"A-are they gone...for real this time?"

"Most likely."

I crouch on the floor like my knees have given out. After taking a few moments to catch my breath, I manage to say to Seiya: "I—I definitely wasn't

expecting you'd use the Hexagram Ritual of Retribution. I mean, I honestly forgot about it."



“While I couldn’t use it during the battle against Grandleon, it’s still an effective method for getting rid of the Dark God’s Blessing. I’ve just been waiting for the right opportunity to employ it.”

“B-but what about Celemonic’s hair that you used as a catalyst? When did you get that?”

“I grabbed it when we went to check Celemonic’s body together.”

“What?! You were already considering performing the ritual then?!”

“I was just taking precautions.”

Even while talking to me, Seiya stares at the area where Celemonic once was, but he eventually nods.

“It looks like Celemonic has been completely destroyed, but I should keep an eye on you for now just in case.”

It suddenly hits me, so I ask: “Does that mean you’ll be by my side from now on? Will you sleep next to me every night, too?”

Hearing that, Seiya mutters:

“On second thought, you should be fine. Celemonic is most certainly gone.”

“What?! But you just said you needed to keep an eye on me! Come on! You should be a little more cautious and—”

“Shut up and go to bed.”

“Gwafff?!”

A pillow hits my face.

“What’s your problem?!”

However, when I remove the pillow and scream, Seiya is already turning the doorknob and leaving.

“W-wait!”

But Seiya briskly walks out into the hall without even looking back...leaving me all alone in my room.

Ugh! I at least wanted to thank him! Things got awkward after he hit me with

that pillow.

I seat myself on the bed and reflect upon the battle against Celemonic. The curse they put on me was so powerful that even Ishtar gave up hope. The only reason the curse was broken was that Seiya pulled off an extraordinary stunt by going back in time and deceiving Celemonic. But even then, their grudge revived them as a ghost through the Dark God's Blessing, and they attacked me again. But Seiya even predicted that, and he used the sacred ritual to defeat them.

He truly is an amazing Hero...

I am in awe of the succession of miracles Seiya has performed. However...

"But even then...Seiya Ryuuguuin will lose someone else very important to him. This is not prophecy. The future has already been determined."

The Dark God's words suddenly flash into my head. She was clearly talking about me. In other words, she was trying to tell me that my life would come to an end before we save Ixphoria...

Just as Princess Tiana was killed by the Demon Lord, I will be, too...

I tightly clench my fists.

"Th-the future has already been determined"?! Don't make me laugh! Seiya's gonna save me! I just know he will! And don't you dare look down on me like that! I'm a goddess! I won't regret it even if I do die in my quest to save Ixphoria!

While I am in an elevated mood thanks to Seiya rescuing me, this is how I truly feel...still blissfully ignorant of the gruesome future that awaits me.

AFTERWORD

Hello, everyone. Thank you very much for reading Volume 4 of *The Hero Is Overpowered but Overly Cautious*. Yes, time flies, and we're already at Volume 4. I never even imagined the series would make it this far when I first started writing. I know it's clichéd to say this, but it truly is thanks to all of you. I'm sure there aren't many people who bought only Volume 4, and that, instead, most people have been purchasing since Volume 1, and when I think about that, I just can't help but feel grateful.

I put everything I had into writing Volume 4. To briefly—and I mean briefly—summarize what happened, a giant half-naked Rista made an appearance, and Rista was cursed by the enemy and almost died. She keeps getting the short end of the stick despite being a goddess. I really want her to come out on top and be happy for once (acting as if I have nothing to do with it).

As always, the beautiful illustrations were done by Saori Toyota and really bring out the characters' charm. I really hope you enjoyed how they meshed with the text.

By the way, the Second Ixphoria Arc ends next volume. Will Seiya and Rista finally be able to save the world despite having lost once before?

I really hope to meet you all again next volume.

P.S. Check out the comics that are coming out when you get a chance!

Light Tuchihi

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